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Papers from the British Criminology Conference

An Online Journal by the British Society of Criminology

BSC British Society of Criminology

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Papers from the British Criminology Conference
An Online Journal by the British Society of Criminology

2025 Conference (1st-4th July 2025)
Criminology for Social Justice
Hosted by the University of Portsmouth.

Editorial Board
Marian Duggan (Editor)
Steven Rawlings

With grateful thanks to all our anonymous peer reviewers.

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Volume 24, 2025

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Editorial

Welcome to our special 30th anniversary edition of the British Society of Criminology's conference proceedings-themed Online Journal! We are delighted to be marking three decades of the BSC publishing papers featured in its annual conference proceedings.

The eagle-eyed among you will have spotted that we're on Volume 24 rather than 30, and that the first edition was published in 1998. But I'm sure you'll also have noticed that Volume 1 was based on papers presented at the 1995 BSC conference, so you'll have figured out our logic. Over the years, many of you have kindly volunteered your time as peer reviewers for papers under the editorial leadership of Tim Newburn, Jon Vagg, Mike Brogden, George Mair, Roger Tarling, Andrew Millie, Charlotte Harris, Peter Squires, Helen Jones, Lizzie Seal and Steven Rawlings. On a personal note, I secured my first-ever publication in Volume 8 of the journal as a postgraduate student back in 2008, which was very inspiring indeed.

This edition presents papers from the 2025 BSC conference, which was themed along the lines of *Criminology for Social Justice.* From 1st to 4th July, the University of Portsmouth welcomed hundreds of national and international delegates to their seaside city, and the weather did not disappoint! From the first day of postgraduate papers through to the subsequent panels and plenaries, a range of academic and practitioner speakers explored topical debates relating to criminology, its intentions and its impacts.

As usual, criminology in all its guises was evident across the programme, with sessions on policing, prisons, probation, violence, identity, young people, cybercrime, terrorism, vulnerabilities and so forth. Several of the BSC specialist networks were represented via meetings, roundtables and carefully curated streams reflecting members' research on *Women, Crime and Criminal Justice*, *Historical Criminology*, *Green Criminology*, *Learning and Teaching*, *Hate Crime*, and *Race Matters* among others. It was also a time for celebration with Professor Eugene McLaughlin, Professor of Criminology at City St George's, receiving the 2025 BSC Outstanding Achievement Award.

While the streams were varied and dynamic, there was a strong commitment among many of the papers to exploring how lived experience shapes our research trajectories, particularly in relation to trauma, harm, and justice. This was particularly evident in the plenary sessions, where enthusiastic delegates packed out the vast lecture hall to listen to a range of excellent speakers drawing from their knowledge and expertise to reflect on issues of social importance in criminology. Wednesday's session focused on the need to centre survivor voices in policy and practice, with Professor Liz Kelly providing an incredibly detailed reflective account on her decades of work in the field of sexual violence. Professor Anastasia Powell supplemented this with a powerful reflection which synergised the personal and professional in advocating for trauma-transformative criminology. Thursday's session sought to advance justice responses in prevention, accountability and rehabilitation in interpersonal and sexual violence. Professor Jane Monckton-Smith drew from her extensive research and practice to critically explore whether Coercive Control theory can balance inequities for women and girls in the criminal justice system. Following this, Professor Nicholas Blagden outlined the vital work he is involved in which seeks to rehabilitate and reintegrate people with sexual convictions, making the case for framing issues of correctional practice and community engagement through a lens of compassion. Friday's session examined justice through an inclusive lens focusing on race, gender and sexuality in criminology. Professor Sarah Lamble drew from her forthcoming book to provide a careful and considered exploration of queer criminology in an era of culture war politics, while Professor Onwubiko Agozino took us on an incredibly comprehensive journey that outlined the key thinkers and experiences which have characterised his influential research on colonialism and criminology.

Complementing the presentations was a wonderful series of social events, topped off with dinner in the beautiful Guildhall followed by some hardcore dancing! The conference closed with a very moving video diary composed by the student volunteers showcasing many of the highlights from the previous few days. Our huge thanks to the organisers, Lisa Sugiura and Francis Pakes, alongside all the excellent student volunteers.

This year's anniversary edition of the journal offers a selection of papers from the plenary, panel and postgraduate sessions, alongside two reflective submissions and the winning Postgraduate Poster. We begin with Lisa Sugiura's beautiful welcome speech to delegates that set the scene for the whole conference, followed by Anastasia Powell's moving plenary speech calling for a trauma-transformative criminology. The subsequent section begins with Raphael Schlembach's exploration of 'policing by deception' and the moral disengagement

characterising undercover police officers' accounts of sexual relationships with activists. Then, David Pritchard reflects on some of the methodological and ethical challenges involved in researching the far-right. Finally, Maria Kaspersson offers a novel methodological take on giving voice to women sentenced for infanticide in Sweden.

The BSC has a thriving postgraduate researcher community, which is important for sustaining the future of criminology as a discipline dedicated to the critical examination of past, present, and future issues. An important part of this is the annual Postgraduate Poster prize, judged by a BSC panel. We're delighted to feature this year's winning poster by Claire Chapman on autistic women's experiences of victimisation, trauma and support. Our Postgraduate section begins with Maria-Christina Galanaki's paper which draws from social media sources to examine ideology and denial among the far-right in Lesvos. This is followed by Laura Sibret who offers some preliminary insights into her research on resource gaps and support needs for Minor Attracted Persons. Finally, Tahreem Tahir, Kelly Bracewell, Joanne Westwood and Charlotte Barlow outline key conceptual and practical challenges in policing cyberstalking.

We're also delighted to include two very informative reflective pieces in the journal this year. The first, from Bethan Archer, provides a wonderfully comprehensive reflection on the creation, implementation and review of a creative criminology assessment. Think tapdancing has nothing to do with criminology? Well, think again! This is followed by an insightful piece from Laura Briody who reflects on issues of positionality, ethics and values during postgraduate research collaboration with the police and how personnel changes can cause significant disruption to projects. My thanks to everyone who submitted articles for consideration. As is usual, all submissions to the online journal went through a rigorous peer review process. My sincere gratitude to all the reviewers for their careful engagement with submissions and helpful suggestions for improvement. As ever, the timeline for the journal is short and its production would not be possible without your compliance with the deadlines.

The 2026 conference takes place from 7th to 10th July and will be hosted by Nottingham Trent University. The theme is *Building Resilience and Hope into Criminology and Criminal Justice*. If you're planning to present at the conference, do consider submitting your paper for consideration in the 2026 Online Journal - information provided at the end of this volume.

Marian Duggan, University of Kent, December 2025

BSC Conference 2025 welcome speech

Lisa Sugiura[1]

Good morning, everyone, I'm Lisa Sugiura, co-lead of the conference. It's a genuine honour to welcome you to this timely and vital gathering. Our conference is centred on Criminology for Social Justice.

I want to thank each of you for being here, whether you're an academic, a practitioner, a policymaker, or an activist. Or a combination of these. Your presence is a testament to a shared commitment: to rethink justice in an era of deep inequality, geopolitical turbulence, and shifting power structures.

We meet today in a world that is increasingly complex and fractured. From the rise of authoritarianism to the forced displacement of millions, from systemic racism and gender-based violence, both online and offline, to the weaponisation of borders. Communities are navigating not just inequality, but trauma, dispossession, and fear. And in many places, systems meant to ensure safety have become sources of violence and control. The global context in which we study crime and justice has never been more urgent.

Criminology, historically, though, has not always been on the side of justice. Too often, it has served power rather than questioned it. Too often, it has focused on the crimes of the poor rather than the crimes of the powerful. And too often, it has failed to address the structural violence that keeps entire communities trapped in cycles of poverty, criminalisation, and exclusion.

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Criminology cannot afford to be neutral in times like these. But this conference, and your work, represents a necessary shift. We are here to explore how criminology can be reclaimed, reimagined, and retooled as a force for social justice.

We are living in a time of rapid technological advancement. From artificial intelligence to digital platforms, these tools have the power to shape economies, education, healthcare, and civic life. But with great power comes great responsibility. Technology does not exist in a vacuum, it reflects, amplifies, and is often reinforcing the social structures around us. We, as criminologists need to imagine and contribute to a future where technology truly serves the public good. Where everyone can be safe online.

More and more, lived experience is rightly being recognised as a form of expertise. People who have navigated the criminal legal system, not as observers, but as participants, bring critical insights into how systems of policing, punishment, and power actually operate. Not in theory, but in daily life.

If criminology is to serve social justice, it must confront uncomfortable truths: that our systems often criminalise poverty while ignoring white-collar crime. That prisons are used as catch-all solutions for social problems we have failed to address, addiction, mental health, homelessness. That colonial and racial logics still shape who gets protected and who gets punished. That technological advancement is often at the expense of those already marginalised in our societies.

But confronting these truths is only the first step. We must also listen, really listen, to those who have lived them and the victims and survivors who have been subjected to harms. We must shift power, not just share space. And we must be prepared to let those most affected by injustice lead the way in creating something better.

This is not just about inclusion, it's about transformation. We cannot afford to study crime in isolation. Criminology must be intersectional, transnational, and anti-colonial. It must see the connections between environmental injustice, economic inequality, racial capitalism, and state violence.

This conference is an opportunity to build that vision, together. Let's use these days not only to critique, but to imagine. Not only to analyse, but to act. Let's commit to making criminology not just a study of harm, but a tool to reduce it. Let's make it a discipline rooted in compassion,

dignity, and equity. In short, let us work together to ensure that criminology doesn't just describe the world as it is, but helps build the world as it should be.

So, over the next three days, I encourage you to engage with humility, curiosity, and a deep sense of purpose. Let's challenge each other, learn from each other, and above all, centre those whose voices have too often been left out of the room. Because criminology for social justice isn't just about changing what we study. It's about changing who we listen to, and what we do with what we hear.

Thank you, and welcome.

Towards a trauma-transformative criminology

Anastasia Powell[1]

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a renewed global focus on how 'trauma-informed' systems can better respond to the lived experience of survivors of violence and abuse. Yet trauma is often still understood through a medicalised, pathologising, and individual-focused lens. Such framings are at odds with the change-making aspirations of feminist and transformative criminologies, and may have potential negative implications for survivors and wider communities. What might it mean for criminology to engage more critically with trauma as a concept and in practice? As change-making criminologists, how can we balance the imperative to respond to the individual impacts of violence with our ongoing advocacy and resistance for social justice and social change? And how can we resist divisive and carceral agendas that seek to co-opt the lived experience of survivors for their own ends? These challenges demand a criminology that is not merely trauma-informed, but rather, aspires to be trauma-transformative.

Thank you to the conference organisers for inviting me here today. And thank you also to Professor Kelly for your lecture, but also for your whole body of work, which certainly has been very personally and professionally influential in my life.

Before I formally begin I'd like to acknowledge that I live and work on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I extend my deep respect to the Wurundjeri; and in

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doing so in this place, I seek to recognise the ongoing processes and harms of colonisation both in Australia and around the world.

I'd also like to acknowledge survivors of violence and abuse, those who have sadly not survived, and those who advocate for change – including many of us who are in this room today. We are united in our shared mission to see an end to violence and abuse in our communities.

And given the content of these keynote lectures, I might also remind everyone to please feel free to take a break, or leave the room if you need, or to connect with your peers afterwards and establish collective care as you need.

Let me start by sharing a story from a survivor of violence and abuse.

This is the story of a little girl who, between the ages of 5 and 10, experienced sexual abuse, as well as physical and emotional abuse, from members of her extended family. These experiences made her feel small, powerless, and voiceless; but they also taught her that fundamentally her only worth and the only way that she could feel loved, was if she was of sexual interest to men and did what they wanted.

These internalised messages from the abuse became a narrative about herself that she heard in her own voice, and in her own thoughts and feelings. But these messages were reinforced constantly by the world around her. Her peers at school would celebrate boys' sexual conquests, while applying the old sexual double standard of frigid or slut to the girls'. Television, movies and advertising would depict women as if they had no mind or self to speak of, and were only worth the sexual allure of their bodies.

She experienced a further sexual assault at the age of 16, and yet she blamed herself, because she was clearly 'damaged goods', and though she had been too ashamed to tell anyone about the abuse, she felt sure that everyone around her could tell that she was no good. As a teenager and young adult, she would accept mistreatment from men because it was all that she felt she deserved; and after all, it was her job to make men happy in a relationship.

It has taken a long time for me to own this story – my story. But I share it today from a position of strength – and frankly privilege – because I am a survivor, and yet I am keenly aware that

so many people, of all genders and from all walks of life, are still struggling to survive. And many of course do not.

The trauma of violence and abuse is deeply individual in that only we ourselves can know how it feels to us – and the unique impacts that it has had on our life. Each of us has our own individual characteristics and experiences, and these may lead us to respond to traumatic events in different and particular ways.

Yet trauma is also shared - in that there are some commonalities in people's experiences of trauma – and of recovery and healing.

Across many qualitative interviews in my career, and I'm sure all-too-familiar to the expertise in this room, survivors have described the violence causing them to feel: small and disempowered, with no voice; ashamed and internalising blame; that the assault is taboo and a terrible secret that they have to carry alone; that their negative experience was normal in a relationship, or 'just the way things are'; socially isolated, and changing behaviours to avoid future contact with the perpetrator, or even other social connections in which they simply don't feel safe; and fearful either of harassment, or reprisals from the perpetrator, or of their own capacity to handle seeing them, or even hearing their name.

As I know many of you already recognise, there is a deep and insidious connection between the experience and impacts of trauma for the individual victim survivor, and the broader structures of oppression in our society. Those patterned behaviours, thoughts and feelings – and that narrative of the abuser that echoes in our minds, and that takes a lot of work to break down and replace in our recovery journeys – is often a direct reflection of the meta-narratives, the discourses, that we as a society construct about gender, violence and trauma. These discourses are not just 'attitudes', they become structural, internalised ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

But a key point I want to make in this lecture, is that it is possible through prevention and intervention to shift these structural narratives about gender, violence and trauma, and to open-up the possibilities for alternative discourses.

Criminology as a discipline is uniquely positioned to engage with this critical prevention work. Because while many other disciplines in the violence and trauma space remain focused on the individuals, we as Criminologists have a deep understanding and analysis of the structural,

the systemic, the institutional causes of violence and the patterns that deepen or reinforce trauma. Indeed, many of us are already committed to transformative social change.

And a second point that I want to make is in support of lived experience within our discipline of Criminology – and the critical role that those of us who have experienced traumas, whether of interpersonal or State violence, have to play in addressing and preventing these harms. I appreciate that a key theme of this conference is indeed in acknowledging lived experience. But Criminology as a discipline has been very much influenced by positivist underpinnings, and a privileging of the seemingly detached, unbiased, rational 'expert criminologist'. Often, I would suggest, in a way that has minimised, even silenced, some voices compared to others.

I want to argue that we take seriously each of our roles whether as scholars, as survivors, as advocates – in the deep system and institutional change that is needed – to prevent reproducing the traumas of violence – and ultimately to prevent the violence from occurring in the first place.

And this is what I mean by a 'Trauma-Transformative Criminology'.

But before I further address our place in this work as a discipline, I want to briefly say some more about our society's approach to the trauma of violence and abuse (Powell, forthcoming).

Trauma sits in the body, as well as in our feelings and thinking. But it is not a weight or a rock that we carry. It is a series of patterns that we learn to live with. Patterned behaviours, patterned thoughts, and patterned emotional responses. Trauma is almost universal. Many of us have experienced a traumatic event of some form or another, or perhaps a series of events, that have left a lasting impression on us. We might act in ways that seek to reduce the risk of experiencing further traumatic events, or that seek to dull the pain that we still feel. Trauma is also cumulative. A particular incident or event might not seem to one person to have the makings of trauma. But for another person who has experienced several or indeed many such incidents – each one deepens the patterns in response to the traumas that came before. Trauma becomes a familiar and well-trodden path.

Some people, survivors of trauma as well as some therapists and scholars, don't much like the concept itself. One reason is that when a person identifies as having experienced or survived a trauma, it can have a lasting and negatively framed impact on their sense of self. It can confine a person's identity to a label: victim, survivor, traumatised. When their experience

was an act, or repeated acts, of violence - accepting that identity can feel as though it is only giving more power away to the person who harmed them. They already hurt me. I am not going to let them take away my very self.

Another important critique of the concept lies in the ways it has been mobilised to medicalise, pathologise, and individualise trauma. This can have a devastating impact on victim survivors' who can be left feeling that they are broken or sick; and that if they cannot pick themselves up and recover, quickly enough, or in the ways that society expects, then it is they who have failed. Rather than the person who abused them, or the society that allowed it.

This medicalised lens was actively drawn on by feminist advocates in order to get malestream institutions to recognise and attend to the harms of men's violence against women. By drawing a parallel between the impacts of sexual violence in particular and the post-traumatic stress observed in Vietnam Veterans, we were finally able to argue that the violence is serious and that victim survivors' do deserve our intervention and support. But it has arguably come at a cost.

This is not to say that there are not severe impacts of sexual violence. I've seen these impacts in survivors accessing crisis supports. And I've experienced many of them myself. The flashbacks are real. The emotional overwhelm, which can take you entirely by surprise and off guard, is real. The intrusive thoughts and memories of the assaults are real. The constant questioning of your self: what is it about me, that made this happen – is real.

But trauma is not beyond critique. As Nicola Gavey has long argued; much of the PTSD impacts of sexual violence come from assaults where victims were fearful for their lives (see Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). Yet in many instances of sexual violence, the lasing impacts often concern our very sense of self – our identity, our worth, our confidence to face the world – and these are directly shaped by our socio-cultural and structural narratives about sexual violence and trauma.

I have, over the last two years, had the great privilege of being a practitioner in training, and I have been training in services responding to victim survivors of family and sexual violence in their moments of crisis. I am reminded of a survivor attending a sexual assault counselling service recently, who timidly asked: "Do you think it is even possible for me to ever heal from this?"

Our society tells victim survivors that sexual violence breaks them. That it injures them irreparably. But this narrative is reliant on the same gendered power relations and discourse that tells women in particular, that their only value is as a sexual object. If someone 'takes that away', then you are worth less.

For men and gender diverse victims too, trauma can be shaped by these gendered power relations. Sexual violence feminises victims in a structural context in which to be feminised is to be put in your lower place. Sexual violence is after all, a harm of power, dominance and humiliation.

Not only do structural power relations create the conditions then for violence and abuse to occur – But they actively construct victims as weak, passive, and broken. These very stories that our society tells - cause further harm. Not only for those survivors' who resist these narratives, and as such are often disbelieved – but in my observations of crisis counselling for victims – so much of the therapeutic work involves unpacking and replacing these very harmful stories about violence and abuse.

There is another complicating factor for our understandings of trauma. Which is that gender-based violence – and women's experiences of the traumas of domestic and sexual violence in particular – have been routinely co-opted to facilitate carceral agendas. As if these were the only, or at least the most important ways, to address these traumas.

And yet we know that our criminal legal systems are themselves certainly not trauma-informed, let alone trauma-transformative. Rather, many scholars and advocates have argued that these institutions exploit survivors' lived experiences while providing very little benefit in return. And we know too that our criminal legal systems are certainly not trauma-transformative for the many survivors who are incarcerated within them.

This is the call of Transformative Justice movements – to pursue alternatives to our criminal legal systems that so rarely deliver anything resembling justice. Though law and order, and carceral agendas will often invoke the protection, rights and justice for survivors in their calls for more prisons, and more prison time – the research has shown time and time again that this is not what justice means to the majority of survivors.

Scholars such as Judith Herman, Kathy Daly, Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland among others, have long recognised, that when we listen to survivors' about their justice needs, we

soon discover that justice is about having the harm recognised - and efforts made to repair the harm – rather than being about punishment or deterrence.

It is also pertinent to acknowledge that for some the answer to the question of whether Criminology can ever be trauma-transformative is simply no. As counter-colonial and anti-oppressive scholars recognise, our Discipline has been implicated – and arguably continues to be - in the harmful policies and practices of both colonial and punitive States (e.g. Ciocchini & Greener, 2021; Palmer et al, 2022). Some applied Criminologists have been directly implicated as an arm of State harm, disproportionately imprisoning racial and other marginalised groups - and our discipline must reconcile that with any critical turn and attempts at decolonisation.

But part of what makes Transformative Justice movements so compelling is the notion that transformative change is possible. That we can engage in the deep structural change that is needed to address the social, economic, and political inequalities that underlie the traumas of violence and abuse and their aftermath.

In using the phrase trauma-transformative criminology, it is not at all my intention to signal a new sub-discipline or field of study. Rather, it is simply to spotlight that the actions we take on our journey towards transformation are not only about the long-term future and shape of justice that we aspire to. But that these actions can start to make a difference - now – both to victim survivors of violence and to those using violence, many of whom themselves have trauma histories.

The feminist movement of primary prevention serves, in my view, as a key lesson in this transformation journey. The goal is very much aligned with other transformative justice movements. To end gender-based violence, by addressing its underlying structural causes, such as intersecting inequalities and the imbalanced power relations inherent in our current gender system.

In the Australian context, it has been perhaps the most influential examples of a transformative justice platform. Unlike more general programs of crime and violence prevention or justice reinvestment, which have struggled to gain much traction; the primary prevention of gender-based violence has become a key pillar of our National policy frameworks and begun to attract government funding. Australian prevention policy seeks to 'Change the Story' (Our Watch, 2021) of gender-based violence by coordinating strategies across the micro, meso and macro

levels of society, that address key factors associated with such violence; including foremost, the structures, cultures and practices of gender inequality.

It fundamentally recognises that though those who choose violence are responsible for their actions – these actions occur in a broader socio-structural context that enables, facilitates and even condones such violence on a mass scale. That if our only response is to seek to deter individuals using violence through punitive legal systems; then we will only ever be bandaging the harms rather than stopping them.

Australia's 'Change the Story' framework, led by non-Government organisation Our Watch, is based on a public health model to violence prevention (Our Watch, 2021), but it also arguably shares with post-structural approaches the insight that the well-worn narratives of abusive gender relations become easy paths to follow. And as such, disrupting these stories and providing alternatives is a key part of transformative change. But these have to be reinforced with more material change such as through education, organisational change, social supports and economic resources that disrupt cycles of violence in our communities and build greater equality and care into our society.

Among the critiques of primary prevention in the Australian context has been that we cannot wait for the very long-term hope of this transformative change. What if such social justice measures don't work? And how many more victim survivors of violence and abuse will there be in the meantime, until this hope and prayer for widespread change occurs?

For me it seems obvious that prevention and response is not an either/or question. That we can and should engage in interventions to address both the individual behaviours, and risk factors, of violence now – while also working on the larger structural change.

And as a survivor of sexual and family violence – I also see in prevention a deep and structural shift that can help support victim survivors of violence and abuse. Through prevention, efforts are being made:

‹ to remove victim-blaming language and representations from media reports of violence,
‹ to hold people who use violence accountable, and invite them to change their behaviour

- to encourage members of the community to speak out and challenge abusive behaviours where they see them,
- to highlight the injustices of violence rather than representing it as shameful or humiliating for victims
- to educate children and young people about bodily autonomy, and ethical decision-making
- to support organisational cultures and structures that encourage reporting of misconduct rather than silencing victims
- to open up models for personal and professional relationships that are not grounded in men's dominance and women's subservice

All of these efforts – make our communities safer for me as a survivor. These same changes that seek to prevent the violence before it occurs – also transform the burden of trauma that I would otherwise carry alone.

Through these efforts, I feel less responsibilised for the actions of my abusers. I feel more empowered to use my voice. And I feel more confident to assert my boundaries and challenge harm where I see it, whether to myself or to others. Violence and abuse are no longer "just the way things are" or "what I deserve".

Now some may say of course, that my lived experience makes me an emotional party – rather than the appropriately rational and evidence-based, academic "expert". But as my colleague Ruth Liston and I discuss in our Book Chapter on 'Public Feminist Criminologies' (2020), positionality is always present and influential in research – and it is particularly problematic that lived experience remains taboo and largely silenced within the academy – perhaps especially so when these experiences pertain to men's use of violence and abuse.

I am also reminded of Sara Ahmed's influential works – in which she has argued that just as emotions have long been used to discredit women and ignore our claims for justice as 'over-reactions' – so too can expressing our emotions in the face of injustice be a feminist act (Ahmed, 2017). An act that challenges the hierarchical and binary power relations between the mind and the body, rationality and affect, man and woman.

It is problematic that our emotional responses to acts of violence against us are taken as signs that our testimony is not to be trusted, rather than evidence that the harms did in fact occur.

I have seen decades of research, as I know others have before me, desperately producing enough 'evidence' of the problems of men's violence for our society to take it seriously and intervene. Women's lived experience is rarely enough of a reason for action – it has always needed to be "proven" – and no amount of proof, it seems, is ever enough to properly fund the demand for support services, interventions, and prevention.

Yet who among us does not have some element of lived experience of violence and abuse – either directly – or through supporting loved ones in our lives? And while it is true that we should value the lived experiences that have been excluded from our discipline, I think it is also true that we could do much better at listening to – rather than silencing – the lived experience within.

And that brings me to my calls to action for those of us who do aspire to be trauma-transformative. That is, we seek to reduce the impacts of trauma, as well as seeking the deep structural and transformative change that will prevent these harms before they occur.

My first call to action is that Public Criminologies and advocacy become a critical part of our roles. Pure research – by which I mean Ivory Tower research - will not in and of itself solve the problem of gender-based violence, or indeed all forms of violence and abuse. Because a lack of evidence has never been the problem. The problem has been the political will to listen to survivors, and to engage in real, transformative change. Evidence is important in directing our efforts – but we also have to roll up our sleeves and get amongst the actions for change. Contributing to the public discourse through the media, engaging with government and non-government organisations, making formal submissions recommending reforms, doing action research, elevating the voices of survivors, adding our own voices to campaigns for change, and contributing to work on the ground are all important avenues for Public Criminologies (see Henne & Shah, 2020).

My second call to action is for Criminologists to recognise that we are uniquely positioned to have a critical lens on the traumas of violence and abuse – and alternative justice approaches. We understand the structural and systemic causes – and we recognise that punitiveness and carceral agendas only cause more violence and more trauma. So our role must be to advocate for transformative justice and deep structural change. And we will not be doing a dis-service to the lived experience of victim survivors of violence by advocating for this change. In fact, I would suggest that we can engage in prevention and structural change in ways that help to

undo some of the very impacts of trauma for those who have already experienced violence and abuse.

And my third call to action is for our discipline to take up the challenge of ensuring that our own research, teaching and collegial environments are safe for survivors of trauma. That we are ready to acknowledge and support lived experience within our discipline. And to mentor the next generation of criminologists to build reflexivity and resilience – whether they are survivors themselves, or advocates, or as practitioners exposed to vicarious trauma. We could be doing much more to ensure that we are building safety, equity, respect, and an ethics of care into our discipline and our working environments. These principles do more than create safe places for survivors – they create safe places for everyone – and they model the change we want to see in our communities more broadly.

Overall, I want to encourage us, as Criminologists, to incorporate trauma-transformative practices into our research, our public advocacy, our teaching, and our own work environments.

Let me end, if I may, by closing off my own story. Because if I could tell that little girl something now – I would tell her many of the things that our wider society is only just beginning to say.

I would tell her that she is worthy of care and respect and autonomy. That she has rights and choices. That she is not responsible for others' harmful actions, or how others may or may not feel about her asserting boundaries.

I would tell her that she should never have had to be a survivor.

But I am incredibly proud of the fierce survivor that she is.

And I will not silence her story.

Thank you.

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'Policing by deception': Moral disengagement in officer accounts of deceptive sexual relationships

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Abstract

This article examines testimony given by male undercover police officers (UCOs) in the United Kingdom when asked to account for sexual misconduct and immoral behaviour during covert deployments. The ongoing Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI) has heard evidence from former officers in the Special Demonstration Squad – a Metropolitan Police Special Branch unit in existence between 1968 and 2008 – about the long-term infiltration of political campaigns. Some UCOs used their cover identities to deceive women into serious, intimate relationships. The analysis presented here applies Albert Bandura's theory of moral disengagement to explore how officers justify their misconduct and deflect accountability. Through an examination of account-giving in the UCPI, the article identifies recurring patterns of moral justification, euphemistic labelling and advantageous comparisons. These are mechanisms of cognitive reconstrual of past behaviours, which are situated within a broader institutional police culture marked by misogyny, excessive secrecy and a lack of ethical boundaries.

Key words: undercover policing, deception, sexual misconduct, moral disengagement, public inquiry

Introduction

In recent years, the exposure of long-term undercover police deployments in the United Kingdom has ignited considerable public and political scrutiny. Central to this controversy is

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the revelation that numerous Special Branch officers (sometimes referred to as 'spycops'), living undercover within political activist groups, engaged in intimate and sexual relationships with (mostly) female members of the public who were unaware of their true identities. These relationships, some of which spanned several years, were not incidental but occurred within the context of covert operations to gather intelligence about thousands of political campaigners. They served to bolster the cover legends that embedded officers within the communities that they had infiltrated – and as such had operational purposes; and they satisfied male sexual gratification – they were 'perks of the job'. The ethical, operational and human rights implications of these actions have prompted significant concern, reflected in the Home Secretary's establishment of the Undercover Policing Inquiry (UCPI). Since 2015, and at huge expense, the Inquiry has investigated the conduct of undercover officers and the management frameworks that enabled such practices, including within the now-disbanded Special Demonstration Squad (SDS).

This article seeks to interrogate the psychological mechanisms that allowed immoral and unlawful behavior to persist over lengthy periods of time. Specifically, it explores how former UCOs have retrospectively justified their actions during public testimony at the UCPI, often employing language and reasoning that minimise harm, deflect responsibility and reframe misconduct as necessary or inevitable. These justifications are not merely rhetorical; they reflect deeper cognitive and cultural processes that were described by the psychologist Albert Bandura (1999; 2002) as moral disengagement – a set of psychological practices that allow individuals to commit harmful acts without self-condemnation.

This article applies Bandura's social cognitive theory of moral disengagement to the discourse of former undercover officers. Through a close reading of officer accounts given at the UCPI, it identifies recurring patterns of moral justification, euphemistic labelling and exonerating comparisons. These mechanisms are examined not only as individual psychological strategies but as reflections of a broader institutional culture within undercover policing – a culture that normalised deception, minimised harm and failed to establish ethical boundaries for covert operations. In a statement to the UCPI, the Metropolitan Police itself has admitted that the internal SDS culture was one 'in which misconduct was tolerated, wrongly, in order to protect the continuation of the secret work of the unit.' (UCPI Transcript, 3 October 2025). The institutional setting of the SDS within the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch provides the crucial context here, with managerial responsibility going high up the chain of command, funding received from the Home Office and political direction given by MI5. Yet, within this framework, it is clear that field officers acted with considerable amount of discretion. Both the

existence and the absence of managerial direction or guidelines contributed to systemic failures in the SDS unit. The foregrounding of individual officers' misconduct and its 'immorality' is therefore not intended to limit criticism to just the most intrusive aspect of undercover police work. Rather, policing by deception raises serious questions about the boundaries of legitimate state power and the gendered nature of policing. While the operational goals of undercover policing are often framed in terms of public safety and national security, the methods employed constitute a unique form of police-perpetrated, gendered violence.

After setting out the background to the study, the article explains the methodological approach. The UCPI is now in possession of a huge amount of information about undercover policing – from intelligence reports to witness statements. While this frames the context, the analysis more specifically draws on the appearances of four former SDS officers before the Inquiry: HN10 Bob Lambert, HN78 Trevor Morris, HN2 Andy Coles and HN1 who used the cover name 'Matt Raynor'. Each officer presents a distinct narrative of justification, yet all exhibit common features of moral disengagement. The article proceeds by setting out three mechanisms of moral disengagement in turn: (1) moral justifications; (2) euphemistic labelling and (3) advantageous comparisons. The persistence of these justifications for immoral conduct, even many years after the police transgressions have come to light, demonstrates how normalised immoral and misogynistic behaviour and attitudes had become in the undercover police unit.

Background

This article builds on a long-term research project, which started in 2015, the year that the Home Office established the Undercover Policing Inquiry (Schlembach, 2016; 2018; 2020; 2022; 2024, see also Brian, forthcoming; Brian and Lubbers, 2023; Hadjimatheou, 2017). The UCPI was launched in response to mounting public concern over the targeting and conduct of undercover officers, particularly those tasked with infiltrating political activist groups. Now already in its second decade, the Inquiry's investigation has focused on the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), a Special Branch unit which used long-term infiltration to monitor hundreds of campaign groups, often carried out under the justification of protecting national security and public order.

The operational logic behind these 'spycops' deployments was that officers would embed themselves within activist communities, sometimes for years, adopting the identities of political activists. Intelligence gathered through these operations was intended to inform the policing

of protests and to be shared with the Security Service (MI5) to counter so-called 'subversive activity' (Evans and Lewis, 2013). However, with few exceptions, UCOs targeted non-violent, political campaigns with mass support, including anti-apartheid and peace campaigners, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Much of the intelligence that was generated simply reported on legitimate and unremarkable activist meetings and recorded the personal details of thousands of politically-minded members of the public. An UCPI interim report published by Sir John Mitting, the Inquiry's current Chairperson, has already found that for the period 1968-1982 the SDS' ends did not justify its means and had use of these means been publicly known at the time, the SDS would have been brought to a 'rapid end' (UCPI, 2022). The Inquiry Chair also found that, in his view, only three political groups out of many hundreds were ever 'a legitimate target' for undercover policing of any kind.

Beyond targeting, the Inquiry has increasingly focused on the tactics used to maintain UCO cover identities, particularly the use of intimate and sexual relationships with women in the targeted groups. Many of the deceived women have spoken publicly about the trauma of discovering that their long-term partners were, in fact, undercover officers operating under false identities. They have characterised the officer's behaviours as manipulative, deceptive, and coercive, with some explicitly framing them as rape, given that consent was obtained under false pretences (Police Spies Out of Lives, n.d.).

While these testimonies have received significant media and some academic attention (e.g. Loftus et al, 2024), far less scrutiny has been directed at the accounts given by the officers themselves. Under the Inquiry's powers of compulsion, several former officers have been required to give evidence under oath. Their testimonies offer an unusual chance for scrutinising how they retrospectively frame their actions – not as abuses of power, but as necessary, even honourable, contributions to public safety.

This paper is concerned with those justifications. Specifically, it seeks to understand how former undercover officers explain and rationalise their sexual relationships with activists. In doing so, it draws inspiration from the work of Didier Fassin, whose ethnographic study of policing in Paris highlights the importance of understanding the moral frameworks through which officers interpret their own conduct. As Fassin (2011: 198) writes:

One [...] needs to grasp the justifications, understand the viewpoint of law enforcement agents, and recognize that where most observers see flagrant abuse of ethical precepts, the officers

themselves are convinced they are acting in accordance with the moral code of their profession.

This insight is particularly relevant in the context of the UCPI. Many officers have acknowledged that the intelligence they gathered had little immediate operational value. Yet they continue to frame their deployments as meaningful contributions to state security and public order. Their accounts are not simply defensive; they are embedded in a broader institutional culture that legitimises deception as a legitimate tool of surveillance. By examining these narratives through the lens of moral disengagement theory (Bandura et al., 1996, Bandura, 1999; 2002), this article aims to shed light on the psychological and cultural mechanisms that allow individuals to justify harmful conduct. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of critical scholarship on state power, gendered violence and police misconduct (Jackson and Monk, 2024; Monk et al. 2019).

Methodology

This article uses qualitative analysis of evidence given to the Undercover Policing Inquiry to examine how former undercover police officers retrospectively justify their involvement in deceptive sexual relationships. The analysis focuses on male officers' own narratives, in their written statements and particularly in their oral evidence in response to questioning during the Inquiry's evidential hearings. It draws on the testimonies of four former UCOs who gave evidence over several days each in 2024 and 2025. Each officer was deployed into political activist groups and engaged in sexual relationships with women targeted during their operations. Three of the officers have acknowledged these relationships; one continues to deny that any such relationship occurred.

The first officer, HN10 Bob Lambert, infiltrated groups including London Greenpeace and the animal rights movement. During his deployment, Lambert engaged in sexual relationships with at least four women. One of these women, known as 'Jacqui', gave birth to a child fathered by Lambert while he was operating under a false identity. Lambert later became a manager of the Special Demonstration Squad, where he oversaw the deployment of other UCOs. The second officer, HN78 Trevor Morris, was deployed into the Anti-Nazi League and the Socialist Workers Party. Morris maintained a sexual relationship with a woman referred to as 'Bea', which lasted for approximately one year. The third officer, HN2 Andy Coles, infiltrated an anarchist bookshop collective, the peace and animal rights movements, and Earth First!. Coles is alleged to have had a sexual relationship with a young woman known as 'Jessica'. While

the Metropolitan Police has formally acknowledged the relationship and issued an apology, Coles continues to deny that any such relationship occurred, asserting that Jessica's account is false. Coles was the main author of the spycops Tradecraft Manual, which gives explicit advice on unethical practices in undercover policing. The fourth officer, who gave evidence anonymously and whose identity remains secret, is referred to by the cypher given to him in the Inquiry – HN1. HN1 was deployed into the animal rights movement and hunt saboteur groups. He took his cover name 'Matt Raynor' from the records of a deceased child without the knowledge of the child's parents. In his undercover persona, HN1 deceived a woman into a sexual relationship that lasted for approximately one year.

The analytic approach is grounded in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), with attention to how officers construct meaning around their actions. I have treated their evidence to the UCPI not simply as factual accounts but as discursive acts through which officers seek to manage reputations and negotiate their relationship with the public and the state – and also with their current friends and family. This method allows me to explore how moral disengagement is enacted linguistically and rhetorically in the institutional setting of a statutory inquiry.

Testimony in public inquiries

There is a rich body of linguistic analyses of courtrooms and criminal trials. However, critical analyses of oral evidence given to public inquiries remain relatively rare, though there are some recent methodological advances. Carlson Cole Arthur (2024) has examined the police evidence given to the Inquiry into the shooting of Jermaine Baker and found narratives that justified racial violence. Schlembach and Hart (2024) used critical discourse analysis to interrogate the evidence given by a corporate manager for the security company G4S in the Brook House Inquiry. Here, too, blame avoidance techniques were employed. A study of Boris Johnson's evidence to the Covid-19 Inquiry, by Kettell and Kerr (2025), further demonstrates the utility of discourse studies to reveal blame shifting and obfuscations.

There are some obvious advantages to studying public inquiry testimony as compared to evidence in criminal trials. Most statutory inquiries now video stream their hearings to YouTube and host an easily accessible record. Transcripts of proceedings are also produced by Inquiry teams and can be accessed by the public and researchers free of charge. Though I have frequently observed the UCPI hearings in person, for the purposes of this article I rely on the publicly-available transcripts, cross-referenced with recordings of video streams. I coded the material thematically, identifying instances of moral justification, euphemistic labelling,

advantageous comparisons and other practices of moral disengagement. I also considered the broader institutional context in which these narratives were produced, including the officers' potential motivations for self-presentation and the quasi-judicial character of the Inquiry. To elicit the best possible evidence, the Inquiry – though hugely controversial (see Schlembach, 2024) – has offered significant legal protections to former officers. HN1, for example, was allowed to appear anonymously and remotely, with the hearing room closed to the public. Some of the other UCO testimony was heard in closed session, too, and as recognised core participants in the UCPI, former officers received legal representation. Further, the Inquiry obtained an undertaking from the Attorney General that evidence given to the UCPI would not form the basis of criminal prosecutions.

The relative secrecy that has structured much of the proceedings of the UCPI (Schlembach, 2024) also impacts the analysis presented here. The Inquiry has organised its own investigation into the SDS and into its successor unit, the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU), in distinct 'Tranches', which are arranged chronologically. To help with cohesion, this analysis focuses on Tranche 2, which concerns Special Demonstration Squad officers and managers from 1983 to 1992. However, this is not an exercise in examining the police culture at the time, but in understanding how former police officers now account for wrong-doing, given what they know today.

My starting point for exploring the evidence given by these four officers was that, although all had long retired from active service, they remained at least to an extent morally committed to the work they had carried out. Notwithstanding individual failings, those four UCOs sought to explain the worth of their deployments. We see this in answers like these, where HN2 Andy Coles responds to a question by the Inquiry's legal counsel (UCPI Transcript, 19 December 2024):

> Q. Was there a feeling that because the SDS [undercover unit] was an exceptional unit that the rules could be bent?
>
> A. Mm, I think the -- the view at the time was that it was a necessary evil that was part of -- and parcel of your job.

Or similarly, HN78 Trevor Morris, who had infiltrated the Socialist Workers Party, answers (UCPI Transcript, 2 August 2024):

A. I believed this was a subversive organisation and I was doing it for the good of the nation.

Q. Are you talking now about infiltrating the Socialist Workers Party or sleeping with 'Bea'?

A. I am talking about the Socialist Workers Party and I am talking about my mindset as it related to 'Bea'.

Others, like Lambert, also answered affirmatively that he had regarded the SDS as an 'elite unit' and that its close working relationship with the Security Service MI5 had contributed to a sense of pride and the 'unit's feeling of worth' (UCPI Transcript, 3 December 2024). Thus, where most observers see these political deployments, and certainly their methods, as unjustified, it is important to understand how frontline officers attach meaning to them.

Moral disengagement

I propose that the meaning-making in officers' testimonies can be examined through Albert Bandura's theory of moral disengagement. Bandura developed this framework as part of his broader social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which explored how people regulate their behaviour in line with moral standards and how, under certain conditions, they deactivate those standards. Bandura was particularly interested in how seemingly moral individuals come to commit immoral acts. He argued:

> People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions. What is culpable can be made righteous through cognitive reconstrual (Bandura et al., 1996: 365).

The core idea is that moral behaviour depends on self-regulatory processes. People generally act in accordance with their moral standards, but these standards can be suspended or bypassed through specific psychological mechanisms. Bandura (2002) identified eight such mechanisms and in this analysis I focus on three that are especially relevant to the officers' retrospective accounts of their sexual relationships with activists; namely those that involve the direct cognitive reconstrual of the immoral behaviour itself. They are:

- Moral justifications: the reframing of harmful actions as compatible with moral standards
- Euphemistic labelling: the use of neutral or sanitising language to obscure harmful behaviour
- Advantageous comparisons: the minimising of harm by comparing one's actions to more egregious misconduct

These mechanisms do not operate in isolation. They often appear together, reinforcing one another and creating a discursive framework that allows individuals to narrate their actions as reasonable, necessary and morally sound. In the context of policing by deception, they also reflect a broader institutional logic – one where the means of covert surveillance are justified by the ends of intelligence gathering.

Moral justifications

Former undercover officers have given into evidence various forms of moral justification (Bandura, 2002: 103), repeatedly using phrases such as a 'moral professional maze' or a 'grey area' to describe a lack of ethical clarity during their deployments. Moral justifications serve to sanctify unethical conduct and to make it personally and socially more acceptable. Any form of ethical decision-making was recounted by former officers as occurring under the specific conditions of total, guaranteed secrecy – and therefore as standing apart from 'normal' moral reasoning. To illustrate with an example (UCPI Transcript, 15 January 2025), officer HN1 is asked about an interview he gave to a police-internal investigation, Operation Herne, into the Special Demonstration Squad in 2014, by which time several women deceived into sexual relationships by male UCOs had begun legal action against the Metropolitan Police (see Wistrich, 2024: 160–204).

> Q. You knew when you spoke to Operation Herne in 2014 that you had yourself had a relationship undercover, didn't you?
>
> A. Yes.
>
> Q. Did you not consider that that besmirched the reputation of the SDS?
>
> A. Well, I know we're going to talk about that later so no, not in -- no, is the short answer to that.

Q. So your position in 2014 was that your relationship with [... a female activist] was not something that had a negative effect on the reputation of the SDS or was capable of having a negative effect?

A. Well, it depends what people got to learn about that when they hear about what it was all about. It wasn't in my mind something that would ever come to public attention.

In accounting for it in this way, officers express the view that continued secrecy around the undercover operations would have prevented harm – harm to the deceived women and harm to the reputation of the police unit. Secrecy is in this way produced as a virtue and functions as a moral shield, allowing former officers to avoid confronting the ethical implications of their actions even years later.

While the women gave evidence to the effect that their relationships with policemen were non-consensual, former UCOs often declined to accept this. For example, when it was put to HN78 Trevor Morris (UCPI Transcript, 2 August 2024) that he had 'used' his relationship with 'Bea' to infiltrate the Socialist Workers Party, he replied: 'I didn't use her. At the time it was real and our relationship was real.' When it was suggested to him that 'Bea' wouldn't have consented to sex if she knew he was a police officer, Morris responded: 'I don't know that'. The Inquiry counsel pointed out that 'Bea' had given evidence saying she would not have consented. Morris replied:

A. She may have done. I mean, but it never happened so she never had that circumstance. That's like saying that no woman in the Second World War who was a Brit ever went with a German. It doesn't make any sense.

Q. Are you asserting that she would have consented…?

A. I am not asserting anything. I just don't know.

While the former officers themselves are clearly aware that they stand on thin ice, morally, they insist that the context of their deceptions was exceptional, even war-like.

Euphemistic labelling

The second mechanism of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura (2002: 104) is euphemistic labelling – a linguistic sanitising of immoral behaviour. Euphemistic language can make harmful actions appear more respectable. We see this in former officers reframing questions, avoiding explicitly referring to the harm done to the deceived women or by reframing the circumstances of deception as being part of 'normal', accepted practice at the time.

In their questioning by the counsel to the Undercover Policing Inquiry, former officers were given repeated opportunities to describe the sexual relationships they engaged in and to name the harms that have been caused to the deceived women. Their euphemistic language use is telling. For example, as part of a civil claim settlement with some of the women who were deceived by undercover officers, the Metropolitan Police issued a far-reaching apology, in which the force accepted that the relationships had been 'abusive, deceitful, manipulative and wrong' (Evans, 2015). During UCPI hearings, the former UCOs were asked whether they agreed with this apology. The answer given by HN1 (UCPI Transcript, 15 January 2025) is illustrative again:

> Q. So you don't align yourself wholeheartedly with the apology issued on behalf of the Commissioner?
>
> A. Oh I do. I do I align, I align myself with my own apology that yes, it was wrong, you know it was wrong, it's -- affairs are wrong generally. This was wrong.
>
> Q. What do you mean, sorry, my own apology? You said I align myself with my own apology.
>
> A. Oh yeah so -- I'd have used a different set of words than the Commissioner used. I'm -- you know, my whole sort of, if you like, approach to what I was asked to do was that no one would ever find out. So no one in essence gets hurt.

The answer demonstrates a rhetorical softening of sexual manipulation. Because the whole deployment was deceptive, the act of deceiving somebody into having sex and starting a relationship is not particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, the phrasing 'affair' suggests that deception should be treated as distinct from police work, a betrayal of the officer's marriage, but not professional misconduct or abuse.

While much of HN2 Andy Coles' account goes beyond this – he denies entering a sexual relationship with 'Jessica' – when questioned under oath he admitted to sleeping semi-dressed in Jessica's single bed, at a time when he was 32 and she was 19 (something he failed to mention in his written witness statement). But he claims that, as he was using the cover identity of a committed animal rights activist, sex was out of the question as at the time there were no vegan condoms!

Regardless of this literal denial, it is clear that Coles engaged in inappropriate, unethical and manipulative behaviour. In his testimony, he admits to promising a sexual relationship with 'Jessica' in the future, to stringing her along, as he sought to remain close to her as a source of intelligence. But in Coles' account (UCPI Transcript, 18 December 2024), this is 'normal'.

> Q. Why didn't you find a way of avoiding that sort of close physical contact with a 19-year old member of the opposite sex?
>
> A. There was no issue with me being that close to an activist. It had happened before, it happened later. It was perfectly normal.

The women who encountered Coles in this way, however, refuted that this was 'perfectly normal' behaviour and described it in their evidence as 'creepy' and 'inappropriate.'

Advantageous comparisons

Finally, the third mechanism of moral disengagement speaks to the deflection of blame by highlighting worse, immoral conduct by other officers. This is what Bandura (2002: 105) described as advantageous comparisons. Comparisons can provide exonerating cover for reprehensible conduct by pointing at the transgressive behaviour of others. In their oral evidence, former officers wanted the UCPI to know that their behaviour, while perhaps blameworthy, was comparably benign. For example, HN1 contrasted his conduct whilst undercover favourably to that of another officer, Bob Lambert (UCPI Transcript, 15 January).

> A. In terms of my conduct itself, I know we're going to talk about this, I -- I don't liken it or put it alongside -- for example you mention Bob Lambert, I -- I don't liken it to that in any shape or form.

In turn, Bob Lambert, sought to distinguish his own behaviour to that of his alter ego ('I was not that person') and to that of other police officers. He's presumably referring to David Carrick and Wayne Couzens here in his answer (UCPI Transcript, 6 December 2024):

> Q. Was the reality that you regarded seducing young women during the course of your deployment as a perk of the job?
>
> A. You know, Mr Barr [inquiry counsel], I -- I -- that was not me. And -- and that is important for me to say. I'm not making excuses. It was wrong. But I -- I was not that person.
> I've seen -- I've read in recent years accounts that I am in the same bracket as one or two notorious police officers who are now in prison serving long sentences for serious sexual abuse of women. I am -- you know, I've been -- that's where my reputation lies, to many, many people today. I am placed in that category.

In contrast, Lambert insisted that he had always been 'kind and considerate and, you know, affectionate and thoughtful' and acted with 'complete respect' for the wishes of the women he slept with.

Conclusion

Undercover officers infiltrated activist communities that campaigned against racial, economic and environmental injustice, often for years at a time. Even if one were to accept that there was some legitimate policing interest in these deployments – a claim that barely stands up to scrutiny – the use of sexual relationships as a tactic was grossly disproportionate to any conceivable intelligence gain. These relationships involved the infiltration not only of political spaces, but of bodies, homes and emotional lives. The harms described by the women deceived in this way are profound (Alison et al, 2022; McLean, 2022; Wilson, 2025). They speak of psychological trauma, the erosion of trust and the long-term impact on their ability to form meaningful relationships. These were not extrinsic outcomes of covert police work; they were serious violations of human rights. There is no lawful or ethical justification for such abuse.

In their testimonies to the Undercover Policing Inquiry, former officers have not offered straightforward apologies or acknowledgements of harm. Instead, they have deployed a range of rhetorical strategies, many of which align with Bandura's theory of moral disengagement.

Through moral justifications, euphemistic language and advantageous comparisons, they sought to minimise personal responsibility and to reframe their actions in a more positive light. Their narratives are underpinned by broader stories about criminality, subversion and threats to the country. Officers claim that they acted in defence of public safety – for Queen and Country. Yet, these justifications often collapse under scrutiny, revealing contradictions and evasions.

Ultimately, what emerges from the evidence given to the Inquiry is not a coherent account of public protection, but a pattern of gendered power and institutional impunity. The use of sexual relationships in undercover policing appears less about maintaining public order than about asserting control over political activism. Because of the indiscriminate and opaque ways in which it operated, 'policing by deception' as carried out by the Special Demonstration Squad demonstrates a distinctive character that sets it apart from overt forms of policing, and yet it also exposes police power in its rudimentary form – as male, sexual power.

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Researching the far-right: A critical assessment of methodological and ethical challenges

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Abstract: Researching the Far-Right presents significant methodological and ethical challenges due to the suspicion and hostility that extremist groups and actors often exhibit towards academic researchers (Allen, 2019). Scholarly engagement with this field has been shaped by externalist and internalist approaches (Goodwin, 2006; Blee, 2007; Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017; Winlow and Hall, 2023). This article critically assesses key methodological approaches for researching the Far-Right, drawing on multidisciplinary perspectives from Political Science and Criminology. It evaluates ethnographic and other multifaceted research methodologies currently employed in the field. Additionally, the article explores pressing ethical concerns, particularly the phenomenon of "going native", a term first introduced by Malinowski (1922) in anthropological fieldwork. This issue remains a live concern for researchers working on extremism, given their exposure to radical ideological worldviews and the potential risks of harm.

Keywords: Far-Right, Methodology, Ethics

Introduction: Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Researching the Far-Right

The academic study of far-right movements has emerged as a critical yet profoundly challenging area of contemporary social science research. Scholars entering this field must

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navigate a perfect storm of methodological obstacles and ethical dilemmas that distinguish it from most other areas of political and criminological inquiry (Allen, 2019). This introduction examines these challenges through an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on theoretical frameworks from political science, criminology, and anthropological methodology to establish the conceptual foundations for this article. It addresses two fundamental questions, what makes the study of far-right movements uniquely problematic, and how might scholars develop more robust methodological and ethical frameworks to overcome these challenges?

The Complex Landscape of Far-Right Research

The first and perhaps most immediate challenge facing researchers stems from the inherently hostile position of far-right actors toward academic research. Contemporary far-right groups have developed sophisticated anti-research counterstrategies that range from deliberate misinformation campaigns to outright threats against researchers. This hostility reflects a siege mentality common among extremist organisations, which often perceive academic research as either a form of surveillance or a potential threat to their operations (Blee, 2007). The hostile research environment takes on particular significance in this context, requiring researchers to develop innovative approaches to data collection that can address this resistance (Fielding,1993).

Organisational secrecy presents a second major obstacle to research. The development of far-right movements from centralised hierarchical structures to decentralised networks, forming digital leaderless resistance, has fundamentally altered the research landscape (Demant, Slootman, Buijs, and Tillie, 2008). Where earlier studies could focus on identifiable organisational structures and leadership (Billig, 1978), more recent research has grappled with the hidden architecture of extremist networks (Simi and Futrell, 2015). This shift necessitates methodological innovations that can map both the virtual and physical dimensions of far-right activity while respecting the ethical boundaries of online research (Williams, Burnap, and Sloan, 2017).

The ideological characteristics of far-right movements introduce additional layers of complexity. Kimmel's (2018) analysis of extremist masculinities highlights the totalising worldview common to these groups, which creates unique challenges for researcher positioning and interpretation. This builds on Rapley's (2001) earlier work on ideological encapsulation, where prolonged exposure to extremist discourse risks normalising what would otherwise be recognised as pathological belief systems. The methodological implications are

significant, requiring emotional insulation strategies to maintain analytical objectivity (Lumsden, 2019).

The interdisciplinary nature of far-right studies further complicates methodological approaches. Political science perspectives, exemplified by Mudde's (2019) work on populist radical right parties, emphasise structural and institutional analyses. In contrast, criminological approaches focus on subcultural dynamics and pathways into extremism (Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell, 2017). These disciplinary differences reflect a fundamental tension between macro-level structuralism and micro-level interactionism in extremism research (Rydgren, 2007). Bridging these perspectives requires methodological pluralism, and the ability to combine different research strategies to capture the multidimensional nature of the far-right phenomena (della Porta, 2014).

Conceptual Framework and Analytical Approach

This article advances three interrelated analytical objectives designed to address these challenges. First, it undertakes a critical evaluation of dominant research paradigms in far-right studies, building on the "externalist fallacy" in political science approaches (Goodwin, 2006). Where traditional political science has often relied on secondary analysis of party documents and electoral data (Arzheimer, 2018), this article considers the need for embedded ethnography, approaches that can capture both the structural dimensions and lived experiences of far-right activism (Blee, 2007).

The second objective involves extending current ethical debates through an examination of what can be termed the moral economy of dangerous fieldwork (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). This includes revisiting Malinowski's (1922) concept of "going native" through modern theoretical lenses, particularly work on emotional labour in extremist research (Lumsden, 2019). The analysis also engages with ethical frameworks, including conducting ethical research in high-risk environments, while also incorporating more recent considerations about digital research ethics (Lee, 1995; British Society of Criminology, 2015).

Methodological Approaches in Far-Right Research: A Critical Examination

The academic study of far-right movements presents scholars with a complex methodological terrain that demands careful navigation through competing epistemological traditions and evolving research ethics. As the contemporary far-right continues to transform across European and North American political landscapes (Mudde, 2019), academic approaches

have similarly diversified, creating both significant opportunities and substantial challenges for researchers attempting to understand these increasingly sophisticated phenomena. This section examines the principal methodological frameworks employed in contemporary far-right studies through three key analytical lenses - the enduring tension between externalist and internalist frameworks, the unique challenges of ethnographic engagement with extremist groups, and the methodological innovations required to study digital and discursive manifestations of far-right ideology. Each of these approaches offers distinct insights while presenting limitations that researchers must carefully consider when designing studies of far-right movements and their supporters.

Externalist and Internalist Frameworks: Bridging the Macro-Micro Divide
The methodological landscape of far-right research has developed through several distinct phases since the late twentieth century, reflecting broader shifts in both far-right activism itself and the academic disciplines that study it. Early scholarship tended to adopt what might be termed "first-wave" methodologies, primarily consisting of content analysis of extremist publications and quantitative studies of electoral performance (Billig, 1978). These approaches gradually gave way to more nuanced "second-wave" methodologies during the 1990s and early 2000s, incorporating increasingly sophisticated ethnographic techniques and qualitative interview methodologies (Blee, 2002). Currently, the field appears to be in a "third methodological wave" characterised by digital methods, interdisciplinary approaches, and more reflexive considerations of researcher positionality (Mondon and Winter, 2020). This evolution reflects the growing professionalisation of far-right movements themselves, which have developed increasingly complex organisational structures and communication strategies that demand equally sophisticated research methodologies.

Externalist approaches, firmly rooted in political science traditions, emphasise structural factors that facilitate far-right political mobilisation and electoral success (Goodwin, 2006). These macro-level analyses typically examine institutional variables such as electoral systems, economic conditions, immigration patterns, and media landscapes to explain differential patterns of far-right success across various national and regional contexts (Rydgren, 2007). The quantitative rigour of such approaches enables large scale comparative studies that can identify important transnational trends, such as the relationships between economic crises, unemployment rates, and far-right electoral gains across multiple European countries (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch, 2016). Externalist methodologies have proven particularly valuable for identifying broader structural conditions that create fertile ground for far-right mobilisation, including the decline of traditional working-class politics, the weakening

of mainstream party systems, and the emergence of new cultural movements in post-industrial societies (Mudde, 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

However, critics argue that purely structural analyses risk reducing complex ideological phenomena to their socio-economic determinants while systematically neglecting the lived experiences and subjective motivations of those involved in extremist movements (Blee, 2007). This critique has given rise to internalist methodologies that have gained increasing prominence within sociological and criminological research on extremism, particularly since the early 2000s (Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Winlow et al., 2017). These approaches deliberately prioritise subjective understandings of far-right participation through intensive qualitative methods including ethnography, life-history interviews, and narrative analysis (Everett and Tetrault, 2022; Hamilton, 2024; Gillespie, 2025). By focusing on individual pathways into and out of extremism, internalist research has revealed the emotional, psychological and symbolic dimensions of far-right affiliation that traditional quantitative analyses frequently overlooked (Kimmel, 2018). Recent internalist studies have demonstrated how extremist ideologies provide adherents with powerful senses of belonging, purpose and identity that transcend purely political or economic motivations, highlighting the importance of affective and existential factors in radicalisation processes (Miller-Idriss, 2018).

The theoretical tensions between these approaches reflect much broader debates about structure and agency that have long been debated in social research across multiple disciplines (Archer, 1995). While some leading researchers advocate for methodological pluralism which combines structural analysis with ethnographic depth (della Porta, 2014), others caution against uncritical eclecticism that might compromise theoretical coherence or produce analytically inconsistent findings (Goodwin, 2006). In practice, research increasingly employs creative combinations of methods, as exemplified by Pilkington's (2016) research on the English Defence League, which skilfully integrates structural analysis of political opportunities with rich ethnographic examination of activist motivations and group dynamics. Such methodological triangulation helps overcome the inherent limitations of any single approach while providing more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of far-right phenomena that account for both structural conditions and individual agency.

Ethnographic Engagement: Navigating Hostile Research Environments
Ethnographic research has established itself as an indispensable yet particularly challenging approach in contemporary far-right studies, offering unique insights that other methodologies struggle to capture. Building on foundational works like Blee's (2002) groundbreaking study of

women in racist organisations, contemporary ethnographers have documented diverse extremist subcultures ranging from white supremacist neo-Nazi groups to more recent identitarian movements and "alt-right" networks (Naeglar, 2018; Volk, 2022). These ethnographic studies reveal how far-right ideologies are not merely abstract belief systems but are continuously performed, embodied and reproduced through everyday practices, rituals and social interactions (Futrell and Simi, 2004). The methodological value of ethnography lies particularly in its ability to uncover the implicit knowledge, internal norms and taken-for-granted assumptions that shape far-right activism but remain invisible to more detached research methods (Gest, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Treadwell, 2019).

The methodological challenges of conducting ethnographic research with far-right groups are considerable and begin with the substantial difficulties of gaining initial access to these typically hostile and secretive groups (Goffman, 2014). Researchers must employ various sophisticated strategies to establish sufficient trust while maintaining crucial ethical boundaries, often navigating complex power dynamics and suspicion within the groups they study (Lumsden, 2019). The negotiation of researcher identity and presentation of self becomes particularly crucial in these contexts, as far-right activists may test or challenge academics in ways that demand careful impression management and constant ethical vigilance (Van Maanen, 2011). Once access is secured, the physical and psychological risks to researchers become paramount concerns, particularly ethnographic seduction, in other words the gradual normalisation of extremist perspectives that can occur through prolonged exposure and the development of research relationships (Sluka, 2018). This phenomenon relates directly to Malinowski's (1922) concept of "going native", which remains highly relevant in contemporary far-right research (Mulhall, 2025), despite being originally formulated in very different anthropological contexts.

Methodological innovations have sought to address these challenges through collaborative research-based ethnography (Lassiter, 2005) and multi-sited approaches that systematically study connections between online and offline activity (Marcus, 1995). These developments reflect the growing recognition among researchers that traditional single-researcher ethnography may be insufficient for studying increasingly complex and diffuse far-right networks that operate across multiple physical and digital spaces (Keipi, Räsänen, Oksanen, Hawdon, and Näsi, 2016). The professionalisation of many far-right groups has also necessitated more sophisticated ethnographic approaches, as these movements have developed more elaborate organisational structures, security protocols and media strategies that make traditional participant observation more difficult (Miller-Idriss, 2020). Contemporary

ethnographers must therefore adapt their methods to study these evolving movements while maintaining rigorous ethical standards and safeguarding both researcher wellbeing and academic integrity (Toscano, 2020; Vaughan, Braune, Tinsley, and Mondon, 2024).

Digital and Discursive Methods: Analysing Online Extremism
The digital transformation of far-right activism over the past decade has required significant methodological innovation, requiring researchers to adapt traditional approaches while developing entirely new techniques for studying online extremism. These digital research methods inevitably raise new ethical questions about informed consent, anonymity and the reproduction of harmful content in digital research contexts (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). The ethical guidelines of scholarly societies provide a useful starting framework (British Society of Criminology, 2015), though many situations encountered in digital far-right research require careful case-by-case judgement regarding appropriate engagement with closed forums, the ethics of covert observation, and the potential consequences of reproducing and amplifying extremist content (Whiteman, 2012). Researchers must balance the academic value of studying these digital spaces against the risk of inadvertently amplifying harmful ideologies or contributing to the visibility of extremist actors, a dilemma that has become increasingly important as mainstream platforms have deplatformed far-right groups, pushing them towards more obscure but potentially more radicalising online spaces (Tucker, Guess, Barbera, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan, 2018).

Discourse analysis remains another cornerstone of far-right research, with critical discourse analysis being particularly influential for examining how extremist ideologies are constructed and communicated. Following Wodak and Meyer's (2015) discourse-historical approach, researchers have systematically examined how far-right actors construct persuasive narratives of threat, identity and belonging across various media. Recent methodological innovations have combined traditional discourse analysis with computational tools, enabling researchers to process larger datasets while maintaining nuanced interpretations of meaning and context (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). This hybrid approach proves particularly valuable for studying contemporary far-right movements that produce vast quantities of digital content across multiple platforms, requiring analytical methods that can handle both scale and subtlety.

The sheer volume and variety of available digital content has also prompted the development of more sophisticated computational methods, including social network analysis that maps relationships between far-right actors and organisations and machine learning-assisted text

analysis that can identify patterns across large amounts of extremist material (Awan, Sutch, and Carter, 2019; Binder and Kenyon, 2022). While these techniques allow researchers to process datasets of unprecedented size and complexity, critics caution against over-reliance on automated methods that might miss important contextual nuances or produce superficial analyses (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013). The most promising developments in digital methods involve multi-modal approaches that simultaneously analyse text, images, video and network structures to provide more comprehensive understandings of how far-right ideologies operate across different semiotic modes (Leander and McKim, 2003). These innovative techniques are particularly valuable for studying the increasingly visual nature of far-right communication, which makes extensive use of memes, symbols and other visual rhetoric to spread its extremist messages (Froio and Ganesh, 2019).

Ethical Dilemmas in Far-Right Research

This section examines three fundamental ethical concerns that scholars must navigate when conducting research on extremist movements - the risk of "going native" and maintaining researcher neutrality, ensuring physical and psychological safety, and balancing academic freedom with responsible representation of extremist voices. Each of these dilemmas requires careful consideration and the development of robust ethical protocols to protect both researchers and research subjects while maintaining academic integrity.

"Going Native" and Researcher Neutrality

The concept of "going native" has its origins in anthropological fieldwork, particularly in Malinowski's (1922) seminal work documenting his immersive research among the Trobriand Islanders. In the context of far-right research, this phenomenon takes on particular significance as scholars grapple with the challenges of maintaining objectivity while studying ideologically charged movements. The intensive nature of ethnographic research, which often requires building trust and rapport with far-right activists, creates conditions where researchers may gradually normalise extremist worldviews (Williams, 2024; Mulhall, 2025). This process of ideological normalisation can occur subtly, through repeated exposure to extremist rhetoric and the development of personal rapport with research subjects, potentially compromising the researcher's critical perspective (Blee, 2007).

The risks of "going native" are particularly acute when studying far-right groups because of the totality of their ideological frameworks (Kimmel, 2018). To contextualise, many far-right movements employ sophisticated discursive strategies that frame their worldview as common

sense or as legitimate responses to genuine social problems which can be interpreted through discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2015). Over time, researchers immersed in these environments may find themselves unconsciously adopting aspects of this framing, even while maintaining conscious opposition to the group's core beliefs. This phenomenon has been documented in studies of various extremist movements, where researchers have reported experiencing shifts in their own perceptions after prolonged fieldwork (Lumsden and Harmer, 2019).

The challenges of maintaining neutrality are further complicated by the political significance of far-right research. Unlike studies of less contentious social phenomena, research on extremist movements often has direct policy implications and may be used to inform counter-extremism strategies (Busher, Holbrook, and Macklin, 2019). Researchers must therefore navigate the tension between academic objectivity and the moral imperative to challenge hateful ideologies, a balancing act that requires careful ethical deliberation. Some scholars argue that complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable when studying movements that promote violence and discrimination, advocating instead for a position of critical empathy that seeks to understand while still maintaining clear ethical boundaries (Blee, 2007).

Physical and Psychological Safety
Researching far-right movements poses significant risks to researchers' physical and psychological safety, requiring careful risk assessment and mitigation strategies. Unlike studies of more conventional political actors, engagement with extremist groups carries the potential for violent retaliation, particularly when research findings are perceived as critical or damaging to the group's image (Vaughan et al., 2024). These risks have become increasingly pronounced as many far-right movements have adopted more confrontational tactics and modes of surveillance to monitor critics and researchers (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

The physical threats researchers face vary depending on the specific far-right groups being studied and the national context in which the research takes place. Studies of violent extremists, such as neo-Nazi or revolutionary accelerationist groups, carry particularly high risks of retaliation (Simi and Futrell, 2015). Even research on ostensibly non-violent far-right political parties can become hazardous when it touches on sensitive topics such as financial impropriety or links to more extreme elements (Mudde, 2019). Researchers have reported various forms of intimidation, including online harassment, physical surveillance, threats to family members, and in some cases, actual violence (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, and Räsänen, 2016).

Institutional safeguards play a crucial role in managing these risks, though many universities and research organisations remain underprepared for the unique challenges of extremism research (Israel, 2015). Effective safeguards should include comprehensive risk assessment protocols, secure data storage systems, emergency contact procedures, and psychological support services for researchers working in high-risk environments (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). Some institutions have established specialised ethics review processes for research on sensitive or dangerous topics, recognising that standard ethical frameworks may be inadequate for studies involving extremist groups.

The psychological impact of far-right research is another critical consideration that has received increasing attention in recent years (Lumsden and Harmer, 2019). Prolonged exposure to hateful language, violent imagery, and traumatic life-histories can lead to secondary trauma, anxiety, and other mental health challenges among researchers (Toscano, 2020; Vaughan et al., 2024). The emotional labour of maintaining relationships with research subjects while privately recoiling from their beliefs creates additional stress that can accumulate over time. Institutions have a responsibility to provide appropriate psychological support and to recognise the unique demands of this type of research when assessing workloads and career progression (Israel, 2015).

Emerging best practices for safeguarding researcher wellbeing include regular psychological check-ins, opportunities for temporary breaks from distressing research projects, and the development of peer support networks among scholars working on similar topics. Team-based research approaches can also help distribute the emotional impact and provide built-in mechanisms for mutual support and critical reflection (Lumsden and Harmer, 2019). These measures are particularly important for post-doctoral researchers and postgraduate students, who may lack the experience and institutional support to navigate these challenges effectively (Keipi, Räsänen, Oksanen, Hawdon, and Näsi, 2018).

Complicity and Representation
The ethical challenges of far-right research extend beyond fieldwork safety to fundamental questions about the researcher's potential complicity in amplifying extremist narratives and the responsible representation of far-right voices in academic work. These dilemmas have become increasingly pressing as far-right movements have grown more adept at exploiting academic research for legitimacy and propaganda purposes (Massanari, 2018). The act of studying these groups necessarily involves some degree of engagement and representation,

raising difficult questions about where to draw the line between legitimate academic inquiry and unintended amplification of extremist ideas (Mondon and Winter, 2020).

Balancing academic freedom with responsible representation requires careful consideration of how research findings are framed and disseminated. There is an ongoing debate within the field about whether certain research approaches, such as sympathetic portrayals of far-right activists' personal motivations, risk humanising and thereby legitimising extremist ideologies (Blee, 2007). Conversely, overly simplistic or sensationalised representations can feed into the very narratives of persecution and marginalisation that many far-right groups exploit for recruitment (Mudde, 2019). Researchers must navigate a narrow path between these extremes, striving for nuanced analysis that neither demonises nor normalises their subjects (Busher et al., 2018).

The role of ethical review boards in overseeing this balance has become increasingly important as the methodological diversity of far-right research has expanded (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). Traditional ethical frameworks often prove inadequate for addressing the unique challenges of studying extremist groups (Israel, 2015). There is a growing recognition that ethics review processes need to be more flexible and context-sensitive, capable of assessing risks and benefits across a wide range of methodological approaches from quantitative analysis of social media data to immersive ethnography (Winlow and Hall, 2012; British Society of Criminology, 2015).

One particularly contentious area is the use of covert research methods in far-right studies. While some argue that the deceptive nature of covert research violates fundamental ethical principles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), others contend that it may be justified when studying groups that pose significant public threats and would otherwise be inaccessible to researchers (Calvey, 2017). The debate reflects broader tensions between deontological ethics, which emphasise universal principles, and consequentialist approaches that weigh potential harms against benefits (Israel, 2015). Most ethical guidelines from scholarly societies recommend that covert methods should only be used as a last resort (British Society of Criminology, 2015).

The dissemination of research findings presents another ethical hazard. Researchers must consider how their work might be used or misrepresented by far-right groups for propaganda purposes (Mondon and Winter, 2020). There are documented cases of extremist groups selectively quoting academic research to lend credibility to their ideologies or to support their

claims of governmental persecution (Miller-Idriss, 2020). To mitigate these risks, scholars are developing more sophisticated strategies for public engagement, including proactive media training and the development of accessible summaries that pre-empt potential misinterpretations (Busher et al., 2018).

The ethical dilemmas surrounding complicity and representation are further complicated by the increasing politicisation of far-right research. As governments and funding bodies prioritise research that can inform counter-extremism policies, scholars face pressure to produce useful findings that may align with particular political agendas (Kundnani, 2014). This creates potential conflicts between academic freedom and policy relevance, requiring researchers to maintain clear boundaries between analysis and advocacy. The challenge is to produce rigorous, critical scholarship that can inform policy without becoming instrumentalised for agendas that might themselves raise ethical concerns (Kundnani, 2014).

The ethical dilemmas inherent in far-right research are complex and multifaceted, requiring ongoing dialogue and the development of more sophisticated ethical frameworks. As the field continues to evolve in response to changing far-right tactics and new methodological possibilities, researchers must remain vigilant about maintaining ethical standards while still conducting valuable research into these important social phenomena. The stakes are high. Ethical missteps can harm both researchers and the communities affected by far-right extremism, while rigorous, ethically-grounded research can make vital contributions to understanding and addressing one of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary democracies.

Conclusion

This article has examined the methodological and ethical challenges inherent in studying the contemporary far-right, drawing on inter-disciplinary scholarship. The synthesis of key arguments reveals several fundamental insights that must guide future research in this critical field. As Mudde (2019) argues, the academic study of far-right extremism has reached a pivotal juncture where methodological sophistication and ethical rigour are no longer optional but essential to producing valid, actionable knowledge.

The examination of ethnographic approaches has demonstrated their value in uncovering the lived experiences and social dynamics of far-right participation. Criminological studies have shown how far-right movements operate as complex subcultures where extremist ideology

intersects with emotion, identity and local context (Treadwell and Garland, 2011; Winlow et al., 2017). However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) note, social research methods, and in particular qualitative approaches, carry substantial risks of researcher bias and safety concerns that demand robust reflexive practices and institutional safeguards. The insights gained from ethnographic work fundamentally challenge reductionist explanations of far-right radicalisation, revealing instead the interplay of structural conditions, group dynamics and individual agency that drives participation in extremist movements.

Consideration of digital extremism has highlighted how online environments have become central to contemporary far-right activism, requiring innovative methodological approaches. Work on online radicalisation pathways and research on visual communication strategies demonstrate how digital platforms facilitate the global circulation of extremist ideologies while allowing for local adaptation (Conway, 2017; Froio and Ganesh, 2019). Such findings highlight the limitations of traditional research methods when applied to digital spaces and the urgent need for hybrid approaches that combine computational techniques with qualitative interpretation. The ethical complexities of digital research, further emphasise the necessity of developing context-sensitive protocols that balance academic freedom with responsibility towards research subjects and vulnerable communities.

The importance of interdisciplinary research emerges as a central theme from this article. Understanding contemporary far-right movements requires the cross-pollination of approaches from political science, sociology, criminology, psychology and digital media studies (della Porta, 2014; Rydgren, 2018). Methodological pluralism allows researchers to capture both the structural dimensions of far-right politics and the micro-level processes of radicalisation while tracing their manifestations across physical and digital spaces. This interdisciplinary approach is particularly crucial given the increasing sophistication of far-right groups, whose organisational strategies and communication techniques evolve rapidly in response to both political opportunities and counter-extremism efforts (Miller-Idriss, 2020).

The ethical imperative for rigorous protocols in far-right research cannot be overstated (Israel, 2015). Recent scholarship has developed comprehensive frameworks addressing the full spectrum of ethical challenges - from physical safety and psychological wellbeing to questions of complicity and representation (Lumsden, 2019). These protocols must evolve in tandem with methodological innovations, particularly in digital research where traditional ethical frameworks often prove inadequate. The establishment of specialised institutional review processes, ongoing ethics training and researcher support networks must become standard practice rather than exceptional measures.

The practical recommendations emerging from this article point towards several key priorities for advancing far-right research. Methodological pluralism should inform research designs that strategically combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to leverage their complementary strengths (della Porta, 2014). Enhanced ethical protocols must address both traditional fieldwork risks and the novel challenges posed by digital environments (Lumsden, 2019; British Society of Criminology, 2015). Finally, greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners, can bridge the gap between academic knowledge and counter-extremism practice while maintaining scholarly independence (Busher et al., 2019).

The societal stakes of far-right research could not be higher. Flawed or ethically compromised research can inadvertently reinforce far-right narratives or inform problematic counter-extremism policies (Kundnani, 2014; Mondon and Winter, 2020). Conversely, rigorous interdisciplinary studies grounded in robust ethical frameworks can provide the nuanced understanding needed to develop effective, rights-respecting responses to far-right extremism. In an era where democratic institutions face unprecedented challenges from extremist movements worldwide, the academic study of the far-right phenomenon must rise to meet these challenges with both methodical robustness and ethical responsibility.

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'It felt as if someone else was ac

Voices of women sentenced for infanticide in Sweden 2000-2025

Maria Kaspersson[1]

Abstract: In earlier studies of infanticide in Sweden, I used the verdicts in seven cases of attempted and completed infanticide between 2000-2024 to discuss legal aspects of the Swedish infanticide section. The material can also shed light on the more personal aspects, which is explored here, as the verdicts contain, among other things, a retelling of what the women themselves said during the trial and in police interviewing and even if written in third person, they still provide an insight into what the women themselves experienced, felt and how they tried to make sense of their actions. A lot of research on infanticide look at background factors and it is less common that the women themselves are actually heard. I therefore analyse the women's stories as they appear in the verdicts and utilise a thematic approach to identify issues the women brought forward, whether these were accepted by the court or not. Identified themes regard the awareness, denial and concealment of pregnancy, another theme regards the inability to speak – either about the pregnancy or about their mental health after birth – and a third theme regards post-natal mental health such as depression, suicidal thoughts and the development of psychosis. These insights challenge the common description of infanticide committed by rational women who consciously chose to kill.
Key words: infanticide, Sweden, post voice, awareness of pregnancy, postpartum mental health, 'crisis pregnancy'

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Introduction

In Sweden, infanticide – called child manslaughter – is one of three homicide offences and is defined in the 1965 Criminal Code, Chapter 3 On Offences Against Life and Health, as:

> A woman who kills her child at birth or at some other time when she is in a disturbed state of mind or severe distress on account of having given birth to the child is guilty of child manslaughter and is sentenced to imprisonment for at most six years.

In previous studies (Kaspersson, 2023; 2024), I used the verdicts in seven cases of attempted and completed child manslaughter between 2000-2025 (see Table 1) to discuss various legal aspects. The material in the verdicts can also shed light on more personal aspects of the lives of these women, which is explored here. A lot of research on infanticide considers background factors and it is less common that the women themselves are heard (Moodley et al., 2019). Here I analyse the women's reconstructed stories utilising a thematic approach (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) to identify issues the women brought forward, whether these were considered by the court or not. As Oberman (2016 cited in Moodley et al., 2019:768) says, beginning to understand the lives of women who commit infanticide should be key in the elimination of it.

Table 1: Child Manslaughter and Attempted Child Manslaughter Verdicts in Sweden 2000-2025

Valentina, 22 years old, suffocated six hours' old baby in hospital maternity ward, traumatic birth

Gunilla, strangled newborn babies when 23 and 29 years old, unwanted children, concealed pregnancies, unable to tell/seek support, unassisted home births

Klara, 22 years old, killed baby at unassisted birth outdoors, dropped baby on the ground and covered with snow, undiscovered pregnancy, birth as shock

Ulrika, 23 years old, suffocated baby at unassisted home birth with complications, unwanted child, concealed pregnancy, repression, unable to tell/seek support

Laura, 31 years old, attempted to drown 11-week-old baby, traumatic birth, post-partum depression, admitted to mental hospital

Natalie, 30 years old, stabbed 10-week-old baby and attempted suicide, post-partum depression and suicidal thoughts, altruistic reasoning

Olivia, 31 years old, drowned six-week-old baby, traumatic hospital birth, post-partum psychosis, underlying PTSD from living in war zone, living in protection from ex-husband

All names are pseudonyms

The verdicts contain, among other things, a retelling of what the women themselves said during the trial and in police interviewing. Even if written in the third person, they still provide an insight into what the women themselves said about what they experienced and felt and how they tried to make sense of their actions. They are what Vaiseta (2024) calls 'post-voices' that contain remnants of the women's subjectivity. In the Swedish verdicts, testimonies by defendants and witnesses are not rephrased into legal language and the women's voices are therefore still discernible – even if one case (Valentina) is redacted and her voice therefore largely lost. As an experiment I therefore attempted to reconstruct the women's voices by changing their 'post-voices' in the verdicts from the third person back to first person. To exemplify, in the verdict a statement by Gunilla reads: 'She became aware that she was pregnant via a pregnancy test. When that was, she doesn't remember now.' Changing it to first person it reads: 'I became aware that I was pregnant via a pregnancy test. When that was, I don't remember now.' I suggest this allows the women's voices to 'appear', while accepting that it might still have been adulterated by the process (Vaiseta, 2024). As it has not been possible to travel to the different district courts and archives for case notes and interview transcripts, this was the next-best option available. Quotations without references are from the verdicts but reconstructed in first person. To avoid the identification all cases have been anonymised, limited case information is provided, and pseudonyms are used.

There are two distinct types of infanticide (Resnick, 1970). Neonaticide is when the child is killed within 24 hours of birth. Typically, the women are younger, not mentally ill, the child is unwanted, and the pregnancy concealed and/or denied. Infanticide is killing of children up to 12 months old, where the women typically are older and suffer from mental illness (Kaspersson, 2020).

The terminology used is *infanticide* when referring to (non-Swedish) research, *child manslaughter* when referring to Swedish circumstances, and *newborn child killings* when referring to neonaticide (Milne, 2021) in both a Swedish and non-Swedish context.

Below I discuss common themes identified in the women's stories concerning the awareness, denial and concealment of pregnancy, an inability to talk to others, traumatic births, mental health and talking about the act. This highlights the lesser-known women's side of the stories and challenges common conceptions about rationality and choice, the experience of psychological issues and taking responsibility for their acts. In turn, understanding the lives of the women who commit infanticide could help with preventing these acts. Themes were

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identified in tandem from the analysis of the cases and the literature on infanticide and newborn child killings.

Awareness, Denial and Concealment of Pregnancy

Issues surrounding a woman's awareness of her pregnancy, whether she denies it to herself and/or conceals it to others mainly concerns newborn child killings (Dulit, 2000). The concepts of denial and concealment are contested and there are variations in their definitions (Vellut et al., 2012; Milne, 2021) but generally, denial is when the woman denies the pregnancy to herself or represses it and does not think about it at all. Concealment of pregnancy is a more deliberate process where the woman knows she is pregnant but tries to deceive others she is not (Dulit, 2000; Amon et al., 2012; De Bortoli et al., 2013). Reasons behind denial and/or concealment can be that the child is unwanted and/or the woman cannot, for a variety of reasons, be open about her pregnancy (Dulit, 2000; Lambie, 2001; Putkonen et al., 2007). In the material presented here cases vary from full awareness with concealment of pregnancy to no awareness at all.

Beginning with the awareness and concealment of the pregnancy we have Gunilla, who on two different occasions killed an unwanted child. Reasons for her concealment were to avoid people finding out about the pregnancy (Schwartz and Isser, 2001). Gunilla says: 'I didn't tell anyone I was pregnant. If anyone asked if I was with child, I denied it.' In police interviews (cited in Johansson and Weigl, 2002) she said her chubby body hid her bump. Her friends did notice and asked her about it, but she did not admit anything. Both Lambie (2001) and De Bortoli et al. (2013) highlight that passivity is a distinguishing feature between newborn killing and abortion and this passivity might be what we see in Gunilla's case when she says: 'I didn't want to become pregnant and therefore repressed it. [---] I also thought about abortion but that didn't happen either.'

Ulrika knew she was pregnant, but repressed it, concealed it and tried not to think about it. Dulit (2000) describes this repression as someone who rather than thinking she is not pregnant she is not thinking at all about the pregnancy. Ulrika says that in 'one way I knew I was pregnant but emotionally I didn't manage to handle it, it was as if the pregnancy itself didn't even exist.' She further elaborates:

> I wasn't unaware I was pregnant but since I
> to myself, I couldn't look like I was pregna
> didn't have the energy to think about what

born because it was too mentally taxing to think further than to make it

through one day at the time.

In cases of repression the delivery is not anticipated, and the birth comes as a shock (Dulit, 2000). This is the case with Ulrika as her repression of the pregnancy makes it difficult to call for help:

When labour started, I panicked. I intended to call for help, but I felt there

wasn't enough time for me to process the em

knew would follow. I understood I would have to answer questions from

doctors and hospital staff, and I felt there wasn't enough time t

myself and to get more into reality. It wasn

but about that I needed to go through some mental readjustment.

Finally, there is one example of an undiscovered pregnancy. Despite having had a child before, Klara did not know she was pregnant until the birth. This unawareness of pregnancy despite having given birth before, is similarly found in other research (for example De Bortoli et al., 2013). Klara had limited awareness of physical changes which can be helped by a small foetus and minimal symptoms and those she had were misinterpreted (Dulit, 2000). Klara says:

During the autumn I had some blood discharge I thought was my period.

Manuel [partner] commented I had gained weight, but I could wear the

same clothes I had worn before, and I didn't suffer morning sickness like I

did when I expected Emma [daughter]. I didn't feel any movements f

the foetus either.

These kinds of pregnancies pose a significant risk to the infant as labour takes the woman by surprise which culminates in panic (Schwartz and Isser, 2001; De Bortoli et al., 2013). Klara tells about the shock at birth:

When I was hunched down in the wood, I could suddenly see how a head

appeared between my legs and there was a lot of blood. I grabbed what

was coming out of me and pulled it out. It was very painful. [---] It all felt

unreal and scary, and I could hear the blood pouring from me. [---] I held it

away from me for a short moment and then dropped it to the ground. The

baby's body landed on its belly face down ag

snow that I trod firm to get rid of the nasty picture of all the blood at the

spot.

The reasons put forward for concealing their pregnancies are more complex than just hiding the fact they were expecting a child and will be considered next.

Inability to Speak

Linked to issues surrounding the awareness, denial and concealment of pregnancy is the inability to talk about it, which might be a symptom of something deeper than just not telling – it points to an inability to deal with the situation, seek support and find solutions. In two newborn child killings, the women had to find their own solutions regarding the child, and it could partly be because of an inability to talk with others, especially partners (Putkonen et al., 2007; Vellut et al., 2012; Klier et al., 2019). For Ulrika, it was about not being able to tell anyone even though she wanted to:

> I wanted to tell but I didn't manage to tell
> help. I don't know why I didn't manage to te
> I denied it all to myself. [---] I didn't decide not to tell a
> pregnancy; I wanted to te l l but couldn't.

In Gunilla's case the inability to speak had more to do with fearing negative consequences and a fear of detection of previous childbirths (Vellut et al., 2012; Klier et al., 2019). She says: 'I visited the social services in September [year] but didn't tell the social workers about my pregnancy. My mother was with me, and I didn't want her to know I was with child.' Later she explains she was 'scared and stressed in case my mother would find out I had given birth to so many babies.' In the police interview (cited in Johansson and Weigl, 2002) she explained she did not want to destroy her relationship with her mother now that 'we finally had the connection that a mother and daughter should have.'

It is perhaps not surprising that Klara did not manage to tell her partner what had happened out in the wood:

> After that I returned to the lorry. I told Manuel I had lost blood and asked
> for a towel. I don't know why I didn't tell him the
> over what had happened and just wanted to lie down.

An inability to talk may also be related to the mental health of the woman after birth. Moodley at al. (2019) found that some mothers conceal the emergence of psychiatric symptoms. Olivia had experienced post-partum psychosis after the birth of her previous child three years earlier and feared it would happen again. Even so, she did not tell anyone; not when asked by staff

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at check-ups after the birth and not her husband or psychiatrist. She said: 'I often keep things to myself regarding how I feel. I didn't talk so much with Raqim [husband] about how I felt' and explains it was because: 'I wanted to manage on my own and feel fine'. When she did have an appointment with her psychiatric consultant, at the insistence of her husband who had noticed a difference in her, she said she was feeling fine even though she was not: 'At the time I wasn't interested in telling how things actually were.'

Traumatic Birth

Research shows that traumatic births can result in stress reactions that are mainly linked to newborn child killings, especially since these births are commonly unassisted (Kauppi et al., 2008) but they can also be linked to infanticide (Nesca and Dalby, 2011). Complicated births, severe pain, drawn out labour, feelings of powerlessness and perceived lack of social support place additional psychological burdens on the woman (Nesca and Dalby, 2011).

Three women mention that labour was traumatic and that the birth experience mattered in what followed next. Despite the risk of newborn child killing identified in research, only one case was described as traumatic, and it was a hospital birth. Valentina states that she hardly slept at all during the night preceding the birth, she was alone during labour without support from family or friends, she was denied pain relief, labour was very hard, and she felt the midwife team was working against her.

Less has been said about the effects of traumatic births in connection to infanticide (Nesca and Dalby, 2011) but two of the cases were committed when the babies were more than a month old. For Laura labour was drawn out and very stressful and immediately after delivery she had severe sleeping problems, and her mental health deteriorated gradually the following days. Olivia tells of the birth: 'It was the worst I have ever experienced. The labour lasted five days. It was very painful. I was induced. I thought I would die. I was both sad and felt despondent by the birth. Afterwards I felt like I had been hit by a car, both physically and mentally.'

Postnatal Mental Health

Research has shown that infanticide of children that are not newborn commonly involve issues such as depression, suicidal ideation and psychosis (Giacco et al., 2023). In these cases, the victims were wanted, well-loved and healthy (Kauppi et al., 2008) and being a good mother was important to the women (Stanton et al., 2000).

Depression and Suicidal Thoughts

There is a body of research on infanticide committed by mothers suffering from post-partum depression, sometimes in combination with suicidal ideation (Stanton et al., 2000; Kauppi et al., 2008) and there were two such cases in the verdicts.

Laura had had a traumatic birth and suffered from sleeplessness. She sought psychiatric help and was prescribed sleeping pills, but '[m]y situation didn't stabilise. I had suicidal thoughts with increasing worry and anxiety.' She was admitted to a mental health hospital and when on Leave of Absence and left alone with the child in her home for just under an hour, she tried to drown the child in a bathtub. Moodley et al. (2019) found that women who had committed infanticide said that they should not have been left alone with the baby when they were mentally unstable and their families were aware of it, as in Laura's case.

In cases of depression, research shows the mother's condition deteriorates rapidly (Kauppi et al, 2008). Some of these cases have altruistic motivations (Giacco et al., 2023) and the killings take place in association with attempted extended suicide (Lambie, 2001; Kauppi et al., 2008). Minor events were perceived as stressors causing concern about their child (Stanton et al., 2000). Natalie, who killed her son and had tried to kill herself, said:

> *I started feeling worried about my son. I went to the hairdresser a week*
> *before the event. After that I worried that*
> *anxiety and strong feelings of guilt; I thought I had irrevocably broken the*
> *strong bond between me and my son. I thought about this over and over. I*
> *slept very little and had problems with breastfeeding.*

Stanton et al. (2000) and Kauppi et al. (2008) point out that it might not be enough with treatment of the mental health condition, the women might need help with childcare as well, for example, Natalie had problems with breast feeding.

Postpartum Psychosis

Women suffering from postpartum psychosis sometimes kill their children – and not only those under a year old (Lewis and Bunce, 2003; Giacco et al., 2023). Psychotic women who committed infanticide or filicide (the killing of a child) experienced multiple stressors (Lewis and Bunce, 2003). In these cases, there is a lack of premeditation, planning (Stanton et al., 2000) and an absence of rational motive (Lambie, 2001) as motivations were associated with

the acute psychotic episode (Giacco et al., 2023). Psychotic women usually gave no warning before the killing (Stanton et al., 2000).

In one Swedish case the woman was diagnosed with postpartum psychosis. Olivia had concerns about a return of illness (Stanton and Simpson, 2006; Nau et al., 2012) as she had suffered from psychosis after the birth of her son three years earlier. At that occasion she had attacked her husband with a knife and smashed up the flat. She says: 'I was most worried about getting ill again in the way I was after Yousef was born. I also wondered how I would cope with caring for four children.' There were also numerous social stressors – she had a protected identity and lived in sheltered housing due to her ex-husband, she suffered from PTSD after having lived in a war zone (Raymond et al., 2021), she had had a traumatic birth (Nesca and Dalby, 2011) – and she felt like everything was piling up:

> *I worried that my ex-husband would find the children. I worried about the discussion regarding letting go of my protected identity. I was more fragile after delivery than before. It's stressful to myself. I worried I wouldn't cope. My worry was also con together with BUP [child and adolescent psychiatry services] were going to tell Emilia and Gun [daughters] that they had a different biological dad. Social Services had also been talking about supervised socialising for the girls with their father.*

Olivia 'started to feel worse and worse' and went to her psychiatric consultant after her husband noticed a change in her. Despite being prescribed medication, it did not prevent the development of the psychosis. Olivia tells:

> *The lack of sleep has caused problems for me. There are a lot of things I don't remember or that they have taken plac when she was born and remained healthy. I do [date] that well. I [husband] fell out. I remember I and Raqi saw such strange things on TV about death, death. I don't know if it was real o*

Talking About the Act

Research on newborn child killing has found it is commonly with an unclear motive, that the woman 'doesn't know', that the child was unwanted (Putkonen et al., 2007) and that the killing was a result of panic and the fear of the consequences of discovery (Milne, 2021). Infanticide perpetrators committed the act when having an unstable mental state (Moodley et al., 2019).

Research involving interviews of women convicted of infanticide (Stanton et al., 2000; Moodley et al., 2019) have found that most women remember the incident and can account for their psychiatric symptoms. Depressed women had thought about the killing for a short time while there was no warning before the killing in cases where the woman was psychotic (Stanton et al., 2000). In the Swedish cases, themes identified in what the women said about the act have to do with situations of panic, hazy memories of the act and that even if they admit the killing, responsibility is deflected.

When a pregnancy has been repressed, delivery is not anticipated and the birth comes as a shock which causes a panic reaction or there can be dissociation where there is no conscious awareness of what is happening (Dulit, 2000; De Bortoli et al., 2013), such as Klara believing the labour pains was her period. These cases can be seen as the result of temporary insanity, rather than mental illness (Dulit, 2000). Ulrika says that '[w]hen labour started I panicked' and 'I couldn't manage to face what I had denied to myself for so long but that was now really there in front of me.' For Klara, unaware of her pregnancy, the delivery came as a shock: 'I saw the contours of what had come out of me, but I didn't look closer. I saw it was a baby, but I couldn't see if it was a boy or a girl. It all felt unreal and scary...'

It was also common that the memories of the killing were hazy and that the accounts of the motivations are unclear (Stanton et al., 2000; Stanton and Simpson, 2006). Women may experience abnormal mental functioning, such as being in a dissociative state which results in poor memory of the act, depersonalisation and dissociative hallucinations (Dulit, 2000; De Bortoli et al., 2013). Valentina had no clear memories from what happened but said she 'had a picture' within herself where she put her hand on the blanket over the child's mouth and nose. Gunilla said: 'I have a vague memory that I might have strangled the baby with the strap of the silk dressing gown I was wearing. It felt as if someone else was acting on my behalf.' Ulrika similarly claimed: 'I don't remember putting the child in a bag, instead the memory I have is that I tie a bag and inside it I see another bag. [---] Neither do I remember moving the bag after I'd tied it.' Finally, Olivia, suffering from psychosis, only had vague memories of what she did with her other two daughters after killing the baby:

> *Then I let the girls stay with some neighbour. I might have left them in the staircase. I don't remember if I came with don't remember ringing on any door. I was outside. I don't remember when the bridge. I remember seeing a doctor at the hospital. I*

Raqim's telephone calls during the night. I
blood ended up on my jumper.

Moving from the memories of the events to whether the women take responsibility for what they have done, O'Connor (1995) discusses how convicted offenders talk about their crimes and that even if acts are recalled and agency is claimed; they also deflect or problematise this agency. This is done in terms of that 'I did it, but I don't know what made me do it' (O'Connor, 1995:430). This problematising of agency is a recurring theme in the women's accounts.

Gunilla says that it 'felt as if I wasn't present at the two occasions.' In the police interview, when asked if it was a difficult decision to strangle the baby she replied: 'I'm sure it was, I was acting in panic and fear and anxiety, it was nothing I wanted really' (cited in Johansson and Weigl, 2002). In explaining her actions, Ulrika said: 'I never planned to kill the child, and I wouldn't have put the child in a plastic bag and tied it if I had functioned and been able to think normally.'

Olivia is admitting to drowning her baby but is problematising her agency. She provides a detailed description of the act and the circumstances around it and then links it to the state of confusion she was in at the time. She said she had heard messages from the TV:

> *I don't know if there was a connection bet*
> *pressing Madicken into the bathtub. I don'*
> *happened. I don't know why it turned out to*
> *children. I got a bang, like a plank in my head, by these messages.*

In an extended suicide context, there is often a sense of identification with the child (Stanton et al., 2000). Natalie told that her plan was to die by suicide and did not include the killing of the baby boy, but: 'When I came into the kitchen, I got an impulse that I had to liberate Neil and myself from the suffering I felt and that I was convinced he also felt.' In her suicide note she said that 'I can't bear to see him suffer from this anxiety that I have caused him' (cited in Carlsson, 2012). The child's death is seen as a loss but also as the better option for the baby saving it from a life of suffering (Stanton et al., 2000).

Conclusions

Themes identified in the reconstructed voices of the women regard issues around awareness of pregnancy, inability to talk about them, mental health and agency/responsibility. The next consideration is therefore what we can learn from what the women themselves said.

The women talked about being aware of their pregnancies and denying them, concealing them and repressing them. In Klara's case she had no awareness at all of her being pregnant, which caused her to kill the child in a panic situation as she was giving birth. There were examples of deliberate concealment in the cases of Ulrika and Gunilla, but they also contain issues of repression and strategies that involved not thinking about it, hoping the pregnancy would go away. The lines between denial, concealment and repression are fluid and, as Milne (2021) found, levels of awareness vary, and knowledge and awareness can be transient and changing in nature.

From what the women tell us about newborn child killings we can also identify a number of missed opportunities on behalf of others to discover the women were pregnant (Oberman 2004), such as friends and boyfriends who knew or suspected that Gunilla was pregnant, Ulrika's boyfriend who wondered why they did not have sex anymore and Klara's partner who noticed she had gained weight. This points to the complicity of others (de Bortoli et al., 2013) as they might have known about the pregnancies but did not do anything to help. In turn, this might have made the situation even more untenable for the women, adding to the difficulty of going through what Milne (2021:36f) terms a 'crisis pregnancy' – 'an instance where a woman feels unable to determine how to approach her pregnancy and what decisions to make about the future of the pregnancy/foetus/child, causing her a crisis.'

The inability of two women to tell anyone about their pregnancy can also be seen as a sign they were experiencing a crisis pregnancy (Milne, 2021). Ulrika wanted to tell someone about her pregnancy but could not; Gunilla did not want her mother to know she was pregnant and had been so a total of six times. This poses the question why the women were unable to confront the situation in a proactive way, which would include telling others about the pregnancy and seeking help. It seems to go deeper and the inability to tell is a symptom rather than the main issue.

Three women described their delivery as traumatic, with a coming together of physical aspects – painful, drawn-out deliveries – and psychological or social ones – lack of support, feelings of powerlessness, unassisted deliveries. According to Nesca and Dalby (2011) birth trauma should be considered as a relevant variable akin to mental illness in cases of infanticide. Judging from the stories women tell about their deliveries, especially when they were difficult, it seems the experience of birth is something that the women find to be of importance for what happened next. The courts, on the other side, did not take these into account, as they rarely

mentioned them in the rationale for the verdict. Given the importance the women give to the birth and that research has identified it as a risk factor, maybe there is a call for a more trauma-informed evaluation in these cases?

Another common theme, mentioned in all cases in one way or another, had to do with psychological factors and mental health. In five out of seven cases the women were diagnosed as suffering from a severe mental illness, which meant they were given forensic psychiatric care instead of prison, but mental health issues were present also in the two cases with prison sentences (Kaspersson, 2023). No matter whether the case was a newborn child killing or an infanticide, women referred to mental health issues, even if they often used a different terminology, often referring to their mental state at the time, rather than mental illness: Gunilla felt that someone else was acting on her behalf. Ulrika could not face what she had been denying to herself for so long. Natalie did not want to pass on her anxiety to her son via breast feeding. Olivia felt 'fluttery', did a lot of things but 'didn't get anything done.'

In the infanticide cases, the women describe their symptoms and the steps they took due to them. Research has shown that in cases where mothers suffer from severe postpartum depression there is an increased risk of both suicide and infanticide, and it is therefore important with an early and accurate diagnosis and with relevant treatment (Kauppi et al., 2008). It is also common that mental health services had been accessed previously (Giacco et al., 2023). Laura had sought help and had been admitted to a mental health institution but attempted to drown her son when she had Leave of Absence for a home visit and was left alone with the baby. (The material does not provide any information as to why she was on her own with the boy; if an accident or as part of a care plan.) Likewise, Natalie and her husband noticed signs of mental ill health but did not understand how serious the situation was. Natalie's mother was called for and a week before the event the pair made psychiatric contact and got an appointment for a week or so later, but it was not in time to prevent events (Wallin, 2020). In Olivia's case, there were signs of a developing psychosis, noticed by her husband and by herself, even if she did not fully acknowledge them – 'I had no understanding that I was ill. I wanted to manage on my own' – and she was put on medication when she eventually visited her consultant. Consequently, Olivia herself, her husband and her consultant were vigilant for signs of mental illness and steps were taken, but the event could not be prevented. As Lewis and Bunce (2003) point out, these kinds of infanticide are very difficult to predict and prevent. The cases show that even if the right things were done by the women, and others close to them, events could still not be stopped from taking place.

When talking about the act, the women could remember some elements in graphic detail while others were more hazy. Neither was it necessarily the details around the actual killing that were hazy. Legal language such as 'murder' or 'manslaughter' was not used in these descriptions. The women admitted having killed their children, but responsibility and agency were often problematised – it was because of a situation where they acted in panic or because they were affected by mental illness.

This sample is too small to make generalisations, but the identified themes highlight that there are complex issues as work and that these cases are anything but straight forward (compare Putkonen et al., 2007). It was also interesting from a methodological point of view to focus on what the women said as a starting point, rather than legal issues or background factors. The insights provided by the women's stories challenge descriptions of newborn child killing and infanticide as committed by rational women who consciously chose to kill (Stangle, 2008). Instead, all the women mention psychological factors, some experience situations of panic – because of unawareness or repression of pregnancy – and crisis pregnancies. This consequently supports the provisions in the Swedish child manslaughter section to take mental health as well as severe distress into account rather than seeing the acts as murder or manslaughter (Kaspersson, 2024). The women admit to the acts but problematise their responsibility, placing the act in a wider context than just intent or choice and challenging common simplistic labels of female killers as mad, bad or sad (Africa, 2010). Women experiencing mental health problems take steps, but it is not enough to prevent the act. It is therefore difficult to suggest any clear measures to be taken. What can we do to help women not having to experience crisis pregnancies? If women seek help for mental health issues but events are still not prevented, what more can we do? Do all women that experience traumatic births get adequate support? Might it be that these cases exemplify the few instances – as compared to infanticide levels historically – where we cannot prevent certain cases from happening, despite our best efforts (Kaspersson, 2000)? This might also support the retention of the Swedish child manslaughter section as it enables the consideration of both mental health and severe distress – and the themes in the women's stories demonstrate how many shapes this severe distress can take (Kaspersson, 2024).

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BSC Postgraduate Research Poster Prize Winner 2025

The BSC annual conference gives postgraduate students the opportunity to present papers in the main conference as well as in their own dedicated section of the conference. The BSC Postgraduate Committee organise a Postgraduate Research Poster Prize exhibition which is displayed during the annual conference.

Posters must conform to a set of key criteria, with the winning poster being selected by a panel on the following bases: the visual impact and creative use of poster space; the clear indication of the research question/conclusions from data (depending on the stage of the research); and the originality of the research and contribution to the field.
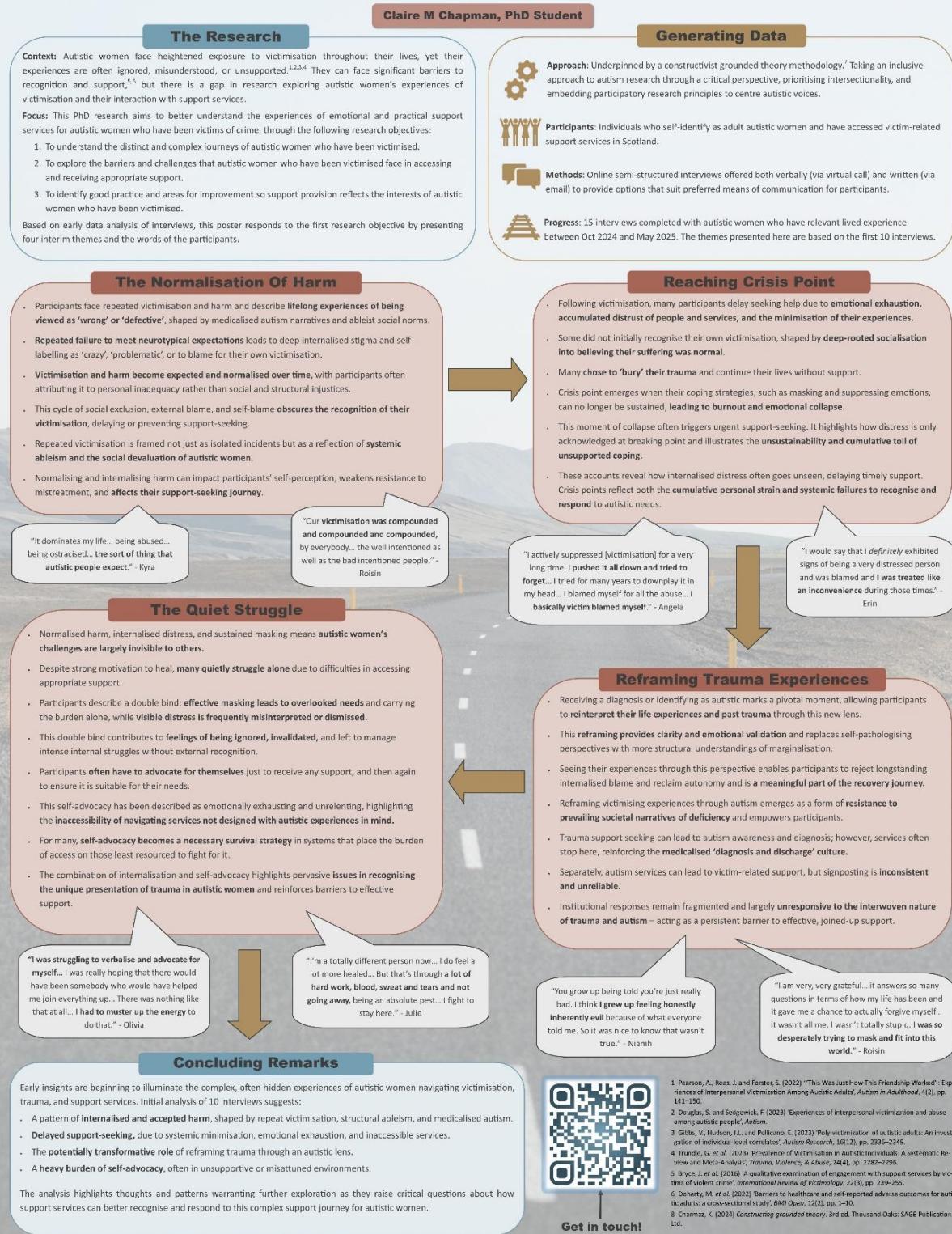
The 2025 winner is Claire Chapman for her poster entitled: *Tracing autistic women through victimisation, trauma, and support: Early insights from qualitative interviews*

Please see overleaf for the poster.

Tracing autistic women's journeys through victimisation, trauma, and support: Early insights from qualitative interviews

University of Glasgow

SCCJR — The Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research

Claire M Chapman, PhD Student

The Research

Context: Autistic women face heightened exposure to victimisation throughout their lives, yet their experiences are often ignored, misunderstood, or unsupported.[1,2,3,4] They can face significant barriers to recognition and support,[5,6] but there is a gap in research exploring autistic women's experiences of victimisation and their interaction with support services.

Focus: This PhD research aims to better understand the experiences of emotional and practical support services for autistic women who have been victims of crime, through the following research objectives:

1. To understand the distinct and complex journeys of autistic women who have been victimised.
2. To explore the barriers and challenges that autistic women who have been victimised face in accessing and receiving appropriate support.
3. To identify good practice and areas for improvement so support provision reflects the interests of autistic women who have been victimised.

Based on early data analysis of interviews, this poster responds to the first research objective by presenting four interim themes and the words of the participants.

Generating Data

Approach: Underpinned by a constructivist grounded theory methodology.[7] Taking an inclusive approach to autism research through a critical perspective, prioritising intersectionality, and embedding participatory research principles to centre autistic voices.

Participants: Individuals who self-identify as adult autistic women and have accessed victim-related support services in Scotland.

Methods: Online semi-structured interviews offered both verbally (via virtual call) and written (via email) to provide options that suit preferred means of communication for participants.

Progress: 15 interviews completed with autistic women who have relevant lived experience between Oct 2024 and May 2025. The themes presented here are based on the first 10 interviews.

The Normalisation Of Harm

- Participants face repeated victimisation and harm and describe **lifelong experiences of being viewed as 'wrong' or 'defective'**, shaped by medicalised autism narratives and ableist social norms.
- **Repeated failure to meet neurotypical expectations** leads to deep internalised stigma and self-labelling as 'crazy', 'problematic', or to blame for their own victimisation.
- **Victimisation and harm become expected and normalised over time**, with participants often attributing it to personal inadequacy rather than social and structural injustices.
- This cycle of social exclusion, external blame, and self-blame **obscures the recognition of their victimisation**, delaying or preventing support-seeking.
- Repeated victimisation is framed not just as isolated incidents but as a reflection of **systemic ableism and the social devaluation of autistic women**.
- Normalising and internalising harm can impact participants' self-perception, weakens resistance to mistreatment, and **affects their support-seeking journey**.

> "It dominates my life... being abused... being ostracised... **the sort of thing that autistic people expect.**" - Kyra

> "Our **victimisation was compounded and compounded and compounded**, by everybody... the well intentioned as well as the bad intentioned people." - Roisin

Reaching Crisis Point

- Following victimisation, many participants delay seeking help due to **emotional exhaustion, accumulated distrust of people and services, and the minimisation of their experiences**.
- Some did not initially recognise their own victimisation, shaped by **deep-rooted socialisation into believing their suffering was normal**.
- Many **chose to 'bury' their trauma** and continue their lives without support.
- Crisis point emerges when their coping strategies, such as masking and suppressing emotions, can no longer be sustained, **leading to burnout and emotional collapse**.
- This moment of collapse often triggers urgent support-seeking. It highlights how distress is only acknowledged at breaking point and illustrates the **unsustainability and cumulative toll of unsupported coping**.
- These accounts reveal how internalised distress often goes unseen, delaying timely support. Crisis points reflect both the **cumulative personal strain and systemic failures to recognise and respond** to autistic needs.

> "I actively suppressed [victimisation] for a very long time. I **pushed it all down and tried to forget**... I tried for many years to downplay it in my head... I blamed myself for all the abuse... **I basically victim blamed myself.**" - Angela

> "I would say that I *definitely* exhibited signs of being a very distressed person and was blamed and **I was treated like an inconvenience** during those times." - Erin

The Quiet Struggle

- Normalised harm, internalised distress, and sustained masking means **autistic women's challenges are largely invisible to others**.
- Despite strong motivation to heal, **many quietly struggle alone** due to difficulties in accessing appropriate support.
- Participants describe a double bind: **effective masking leads to overlooked needs** and carrying the burden alone, while **visible distress is frequently misinterpreted or dismissed**.
- This double bind contributes to **feelings of being ignored, invalidated**, and left to manage intense internal struggles without external recognition.
- Participants **often have to advocate for themselves** just to receive any support, and then again to ensure it is suitable for their needs.
- This self-advocacy has been described as emotionally exhausting and unrelenting, highlighting the **inaccessibility of navigating services not designed with autistic experiences in mind**.
- For many, **self-advocacy becomes a necessary survival strategy** in systems that place the burden of access on those least resourced to fight for it.
- The combination of internalisation and self-advocacy highlights pervasive **issues in recognising the unique presentation of trauma in autistic women** and reinforces barriers to effective support.

> "I was struggling to verbalise and advocate for myself... I was really hoping that there would have been somebody who would have helped me join everything up... There was nothing like that at all... **I had to muster up the energy to do that.**" - Olivia

> "I'm a totally different person now... I do feel a lot more healed... But that's through **a lot of hard work, blood, sweat and tears and not going away**, being an absolute pest... I fight to stay here." - Julie

Reframing Trauma Experiences

- Receiving a diagnosis or identifying as autistic marks a pivotal moment, allowing participants to **reinterpret their life experiences and past trauma** through this new lens.
- This reframing provides clarity and emotional validation and replaces self-pathologising perspectives with more structural understandings of marginalisation.
- Seeing their experiences through this perspective enables participants to reject longstanding internalised blame and reclaim autonomy and is **a meaningful part of the recovery journey**.
- Reframing victimising experiences through autism emerges as a form of **resistance to prevailing societal narratives of deficiency** and empowers participants.
- Trauma support seeking can lead to autism awareness and diagnosis; however, services often stop here, reinforcing the **medicalised 'diagnosis and discharge' culture**.
- Separately, autism services can lead to victim-related support, but signposting is **inconsistent and unreliable**.
- Institutional responses remain fragmented and largely **unresponsive to the interwoven nature of trauma and autism** – acting as a persistent barrier to effective, joined-up support.

> "You grow up being told you're just really bad. I think **I grew up feeling honestly inherently evil** because of what everyone told me. So it was nice to know that wasn't true." - Niamh

> "I am very, very grateful... it answers so many questions in terms of how my life has been and it gave me a chance to actually forgive myself... it wasn't all me, I wasn't totally stupid. **I was so desperately trying to mask and fit into this world.**" - Roisin

Concluding Remarks

Early insights are beginning to illuminate the complex, often hidden experiences of autistic women navigating victimisation, trauma, and support services. Initial analysis of 10 interviews suggests:

- A pattern of **internalised and accepted harm**, shaped by repeat victimisation, structural ableism, and medicalised autism.
- **Delayed support-seeking**, due to systemic minimisation, emotional exhaustion, and inaccessible services.
- The **potentially transformative role** of reframing trauma through an autistic lens.
- A heavy burden of **self-advocacy**, often in unsupportive or misattuned environments.

The analysis highlights thoughts and patterns warranting further exploration as they raise critical questions about how support services can better recognise and respond to this complex support journey for autistic women.

Get in touch!

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The far-right in Lesvos: Ideology and denial

Maria-Christina Galanaki[1]

Abstract:

Existing research on the Greek far-right has largely focused on the Golden Dawn (GD), the former official far-right party and now designated criminal organization. While the ideology, rise and crimes of the GD have been thoroughly examined, other, equally dangerous far-right actors have been overlooked. This article offers a first insight into the Free Citizens (FC), a municipal political party based in Mytilene, Lesvos with intense anti-immigrant activity. The article aims to explore the ideological background of the FC, an organization that consistently denies any connection to far-right ideologies and movements. Drawing on findings from my PhD thesis on "Anti-Immigration Vigilantism by the Far-Right at the National Borders: The Case of Greece," the analysis is based on a qualitative content analysis of FC's Facebook posts. It explores how ideas of national purity, dangerous 'others,' conspiracy theories, and violence against migrants shape the FC's radical right discourse, while also examining its strategies of denial.

Key Terms: Far-right, Lesvos, Migrants, Greece, Violence

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[1] This research was undertaken at Bangor University. As the author has now completed her doctorate, please contact the editor if you require her contact details.

Introduction: Setting the Scene and Looking Beyond the Golden Dawn

From February to July 2020, a series of anti-immigration vigilante activities took place in Lesvos as a response to the 13,000 incoming migrants who arrived at Greece's land and sea borders following the Turkish president's decision to suspend the halt of immigrant crossings within the Turkish border (Feiitz, 2020). Local far-right supporters, GD members, and civilian populations established roadblocks at key transit points to prevent migrants and NGO workers from entering the island's refugee camps. Migrants, NGO staff, and volunteers attempting to pass were verbally and physically assaulted (Papadopoulos, 2020). In addition, armed, vigilante groups started conducting anti-immigrant community patrols across the island (The Press Project, 2020c; Ignatiadis, 2020). Pan-European far-right organizations were also present at the events with members of the German Identitarian Movement assisting in the creation of "storm troopers" which targeted migrants, left-wing activists, and NGO workers (Agelidis, 2020). This period also involved arsons targeting refugee support structures as well as accommodation facilities that had agreed to host asylum seekers (The Press Project, 2020a; Pagoudis, 2020); Kouros, 2025.

The vigilante violence of the far-right in Lesvos during this period is not new but rather constitutes a continuation of the anti-immigrant violence that has plagued the island since 2015. Such violence includes documented episodes of verbal and physical assaults against migrants by local residents, government officials, and law enforcement personnel; organized far-right pogroms; the presence of armed civilian patrols as well as cases of local farmers reportedly shooting migrants (Galanaki, 2025; I Efimerida ton Syntakton, 2018; Fielitz, 2020; The Press Project, 2020a,2020b,2020c; Kouros, 2025).

While media sources have examined the intense far-right activity in Lesvos, there remains a significant gap in empirical academic research on the ideological frameworks and violent activities of the local far-right (Galanaki, 2025).Jansen's (2015), Petrou's (2023) and Kouros' (2025) empirical studies have explored the relationship between anti-immigrant mobilization and the wider far-right in Lesvos. Yet, the focus of these studies is not the examination of the ideology and function of specific far-right organizations which are active in the island. Existing literature on Greek far-right organizations has predominantly focused on the rise, recruitment practices, structure, ideology and criminal activity of the Golden Dawn (Ellinas 2013;2015; Dinnas et al., 2019; Sakellariou, 2015; Koronaiou at al., 2015; Koronaiou and Sakellariou, 2013;

Georgiadou, 2013; Dalakoglou, 2013; Kyriazi, 2016, Bistis, 2013; Vrakopoulos and Hiliakopoulou, 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2015; Lazaridis and Skleparis, 2015; Siapera and Veikou, 2016). However, this focus has neglected the role of lesser-known and equally dangerous, far-right actors, particularly those acting on a local rather than a national level.

Media coverage of the 2020 vigilante violence in Lesvos revealed the involvement of a local municipal political party, the Free Citizens of Mytilene (FC), in a range of anti-immigration vigilante activities (The Press Project, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). The FC party was created in 2018 and came second in the 2019 municipal elections of Mytilene, Lesvos. The party has adopted an anti-immigrant discourse but does not overtly ascribe to any political ideology. Existing evidence and empirical findings not only illustrate the FC's involvement in anti-immigrant mobilizations but also the links of the party to the GD. More specifically, some members of the party were previously members of the GD. Similarly, both members of the GD and the FC were previously part of the Patriotic Movement of Mytilene, a far-right organization created in 2015. Last, the FC support vigilante activities which were led by members of the GD as well as have refused to welcome the court's decision designating the GD as a criminal organization, indirectly framing it as unfair (Galanaki, 2025).

This article aims to address this research gap through a focused case study of the Free Citizens of Mytilene as a local political party that embraces radical right ideology while denying any affiliation with far-right ideas and movements. Drawing on the qualitative content analysis of the FC's online propaganda, this article first explores the ideological messages of the party, focusing on its ethnic nationalist ideas and the employment of radical right arguments. It then examines the discursive strategies employed by the FC to deny their far-right views, arguing that such strategies are used to normalize xenophobic rhetoric, reframe anti-immigration vigilantism as acts of self-defence and serve the party's reputation.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article form part of a wider PhD project titled *" A n Anti-immigration Vigilantism by the Far-Right at the National* Both PhD study *The Ca* explored two main research questions: RQ1) *What are the social, cultural and political influences of anti-immigration vigilantism in Lesvos?* and RQ2) *" I s there evidence t who engage in anti-immigration vigilantism in Lesvos share or endorse far-right Views?".* address these questions, the broader study employed the qualitative content analysis of the

ideological messages of the GD and the FC as well as five semi-structured interviews with victims and witnesses of anti-immigration vigilantism in Lesvos. While situated within that broader study, this article centres specifically on the findings stemming from the qualitative content analysis of the FC's ideological messages, illustrating the party's far-right ideology and the ways through which it denies them.

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was selected as the most appropriate method for exploring the ideological background of the FC. QCA is a systematic coding and categorizing approach used to analyse large volumes of textual data in order to identify patterns within it (Pope et al., 2006). Berelson (1952) argues that content analysis is very effective in identifying propaganda and examining both the structure and intent of communications. Green and Thorogood (2004) have also highlighted its suitability for under-researched phenomena, as it facilitates the detection of frequently occurring themes in the data.

For this study, a total of 450 posts (text and images) published on the FC's official Facebook page during 2020 were collected and analysed. These are all the posts published by the party in that year. The decision to focus exclusively on posts from 2020 was based on three key factors. First, the current FC Facebook page only started operating in June 2020, following the removal of their previous page. Second, this timeframe coincides with the FC's reported involvement in anti-immigration vigilantism and was thus assumed to best reflect both their ideological background and activities. Third, due to Facebook's restrictions on data extraction through tools such as N-Capture or browser extensions, all posts had to be manually copied into a Word document before being imported into NVivo for analysis. As this is a time-consuming process, no data was collected for the years 2021 and 2022.

In terms of ethics, the public nature of the Facebook page meant that in line with Townsend et al. (2016), there was no requirement to disclose the research purposes or obtain informed consent for the use of publicly accessible material. Any posts re-shared from personal, public profiles were anonymized to protect the original authors. The study received ethical approval from both the Ethics Committee and the Sensitive Research Ethics Committee of Bangor University.

The content analysis followed a *directed* (deductive) approach, where codes are generated from existing literature rather than emerging solely from the raw data (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Also known as Deductive Category Application, this process involves identifying key concepts from the literature and applying them as initial codes (Mayring, 2000). While this study did not employ a pre-determined set of codes, the coding process was

informed by prior research on ethnic nationalism, radical right arguments, and discursive strategies of racism denial. An *inductive* element was also present as new patterns emerging from the raw data were also coded, even if they were not directly relevant to the existing literature.

The analysis followed the stages outlined by Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). First, all 450 posts were read multiple times to highlight the meaning units in the text which reflected the political views of the FC. These meaning units were then condensed through the removal of non-essential words without altering their core meaning (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Next, codes which would describe the content of these meaning units were generated. (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2017). A total of three codes reflecting the political views of the FC were developed. These included *"Ethnic Nationalistic Sentiment"*, *"Denial of Far-Right Character"* and *"Links to the National and Transnational Far-Right"*. Then, by grouping these codes, I created the category "Far-Right Character". This category provides a focused insight into the organization's ideological background which constitutes the main purpose of this article. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the category and its corresponding codes. The creation of a theme was not necessary as all the codes could be efficiently categorized in one category. The analysis presented in this article focuses on the codes *Ethnic Nationalistic Sentiment* and *Denial of Far-Right Character*. The code *Links to the National and Transnational Far-Right* is excluded, as it shifts the focus from the ideology of the FC to the organization's external links, which fall outside the scope of this article. It should be noted that while the wider PhD study produced findings showing the links between the FC and the GD (see introduction section of this paper), the findings did not illustrate any specific links between the FC and transnational far-right organizations (Galanaki, 2025).

Table 1 Category Description and Included Codes

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	INCLUDED CODES
Far-Right Character	Discourses reflecting the adoption of far-right ideas	‹ Ethnic Nationalistic Sentiment ‹ Denial of Far-Right Character ‹ Links to the National and Transnational Far-Right

Findings and Discussion

The Free Citizens as a Radical Right Organization

There are various, equally valid definitions of nationalism (Kohn, 2008; Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Mudde, 2010). In this analysis, I adopt the definition by Griffin (2003, 154), who defined nationalism as "the sense of belonging and serving a perceived national community." Nationalism has five main characteristics. First, it entails the belief that a nation possesses a unique cultural identity that distinguishes it from others and provides it with a particular "historical mission." Second, it includes the idea that the nation holds a unique set of cultural, historical, constitutional, geographical, religious, linguistic and genetic realities. Third, it involves pride in the values, culture, and traditions of the nation. Fourth, it supports the notion that sovereignty should be exercised by and for the people of that nation. Finally, nationalism can be either in civic or ethnic. Civic nationalism understands the nation as political community of equal citizens, where belonging is based on participation in shared institutions and acceptance of common laws and values (Kymlicka, 2001). It supports liberal principles and individual rights as well as promotes the unity of those born in the same nation regardless of ethnic or religious differences. The sovereignty of the national group is promoted, but in ways that ensure equal access to welfare, opportunities, and services for those not belonging to the "native" group (Bar On, 2018).

In contrast, ethnic nationalism defines the nation through shared ancestry, culture, language, and historical traditions, viewing membership as rooted in common origin. Ethnic nationalism can be liberal and legitimate when expressed by minority nations (e.g., Indigenous people in the US) who aim to preserve their language, culture, and self-government without restricting the rights of others. Yet, ethnic nationalism is xenophobic and illiberal when it is expressed by members of the majority group to marginalize the minority groups (Kymlicka, 2001). In that case, ethnic nationalism has an ethnocentric character based on the belief that the "natives" must hold absolute dominance, while ethnic minorities are deemed inferior and should be discriminated against and ultimately excluded from the "nation" (Kohn, 2008; Bar-On, 2018). This section discusses ethnic nationalist ideas and presents findings which illustrate their adoption by the FC. These findings were coded under the code "*E t h n i c   N a t i o n a l   S e n t i m e n t*," used to describe the ethnic nationalist ideas of the party. The code appears 19 times across 19 of the FC's 450 posts.

First, the notion of "tribal solidarity" is central in ethnic nationalism. "Tribal solidarity" derives from the idea that "native" citizens possess a strong "emotional, almost mystical" connection to an idealized and glorious past (Kohn 2008, 574). The ethnic nationalist idea of a glorified

past is evident in posts referring to the shared history of Greek citizens in Lesvos. These posts celebrate the Greek struggle for liberation from the Ottoman occupation and the success of the Greek Revolution of 1821, as well as the resistance against Nazi forces during WW2. For instance:

(FC Facebook Page, 16.10.2020)

In this image, one sees black and white portraits of individuals who fought for Greece's liberation across different historical periods, including the war against the Persians, the Revolution of 1821, and WW2, set against a colour image depicting Muslims praying. The caption reads: "all those fought…so we can have this?". The black and white portraits of national heroes reflect the ethnic nationalist idea of a common, heroic past, contrasted with the FC's depiction of Greece's present. The post equates immigration with historical periods of enslavement and war, framing migrants as "colonizers" and as successors to past enemies, particularly Turkey (Galanaki, 2025). This is reinforced by the blue and red captions, symbolising the Greek and Turkish national flags respectively. The image of Muslims praying strengthens the discourse of a supposed "colonization" of Greece by Muslim migrants, linking to the FC's notion of the "Islamization" of Greece discussed later in this section. The image also reflects the second core element of ethnic nationalism: the strict division between "us", the "pure", "native" population and "them", the "dangerous others" (Bar-On, 2018).

More specifically, ethnic nationalism is the same as the concept of nativism, as both involve the belief that nation-states should be exclusively inhabited by the "native", dominant in-group, while individuals and ideas from out-groups are framed as threats to national homogeneity (Mudde 2007, 18–24). Mudde (2007) argues that nativism is evident in attempts to safeguard the "Western Christian values" which are considered the "authentic native culture". Non-native groups are perceived as threats to these values. These beliefs are central for the radical right,

which makes calls for mass deportations, zero-tolerance immigration policies, and migration bans to defend these "native" values (Akkerman and Rooduijk 2015, 1141). The idea of a homogenous nation is consistently promoted by the FC, who clearly distinguish the shared past, values, and identity of the Greek residents of Lesvos from those of migrants, who are framed as existential threats. This is evident in posts such as:

" We   a r e   t h e   i (ndf Leivgse)ewnhoohuavs beep livingpinloure territory

for   c e n t u r i e s . "   (F C   F a c e b o o k   P a g e ,

(FC Facebook Page, 09.09.2020)

R k e v w t g ø u ' w b g u d é t h k g r v k e q p ≼   " A l l   t o g e t h e r   f o

" A s   i n   e v e r y   c o u n t r y ,   t h e   i n d i g e n o u s   p e o p

the wishes of the Greeks with their religion, their customs and their traditions

m u s t   b e   r e s p e c t e d . "   (F C   F a c e b o o k   P a g

" W e   h a v e   e x i s t e d   f o r   t h o u s a n d s   o f   y e a r s   n

become Africa, Pakistan, Somalia…T H E   G R E E K S   W I L L   R U L E   I N   G R E

(FC Facebook Page, 12.09.2020)

Ethnic nationalists also reject multiculturalism which is viewed as a liberal concept that threatens homogeneity. This perceived threat underlines the radical right's opposition to pro-immigration governments. The far-right often denies allegations of racism, instead accusing pro-immigration actors of being "racist" toward the "native" population by threatening the "native" values (Griffin, 2003). The FC's posts reflect this strategy, as they argue that they are not racist, far right or extremist for wanting to reclaim the sovereignty of their island (denial strategies are discussed more in the next section). Solidarity with immigrants is presented as discriminatory toward Greeks, as reflected in this post:

The evidence presented show that the FC support ethnic nationalism, but this alone is not enough to label them as far-right. As such, the following paragraphs examine whether the FC's discourse also reflects the main arguments of contemporary radical right organizations. A common strategy of the radical right is the construction of threats to ethnic identity, culture, and existence. While the far-right sees capitalism, Americanization, and terrorism as threats, immigrants and refugees are considered the most significant ones due to their perceived role in demographic changes and the replacement of the "native" population (Mudde, 2019). Contemporary far-right movements have shifted focus from financial insecurities to identity concerns. Williams (2006, 4–5) argues that while economic issues are seen as temporary, the loss of ethnic identity is perceived as irreversible. As such, the public values ethnic identity over financial well-being. The far-right capitalizes this insecurity by presenting immigration and multiculturalism as threats to the very existence of the ethnic identity. The FC have adopted this argument as they consistently frame migrants as cultural, religious, ethnic, and criminal threats. The party refers to the replacement of the Greek population and values and the "Islamization" and "Africanization" of the island. For example, this post is used to describe the refugee crisis:

> "Africanization and Islamization of a continent and demographic genocide of its inhabitants by replacement. Cultural imperialism, racism, crimes against humanity!!!" (FC Facebook Page, 04.09.2020)

References to the replacement of the "natives" are further associated with the radical right's conspiracies which aim to scapegoat out-groups and generate fear, creating internal and external enemies that must be removed to achieve "native" dominance (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2002; Fennema, 2004). The FC have adopted the far-right's Great Replacement Theories which is evident in the identification of the Left, NGOs, and migrants as multi-faced threats aiming to Islamize Lesvos. The Great Replacement Theories are evident in phrases such as "the Africanization of the island," "asymmetric threats," "the plunder of the island," "the creation of Muslim cities," "the permanent loss of Greek sovereignty," and "organized colonization." Immigration is presented as an "invasion", with mosque construction and refugee centres constituting evidence of Islamization. While the FC do not propose "ethnic cleansing," they support mass deportations, illegal pushbacks, and vigilantism to "protect the Greek borders"

and "restore the Greek sovereignty of the island". Violence against migrants is framed as self-defence. For example:

> "THESE CITIES, THESE NEIGHBORHOODS BELONG SOLELY TO THE GREEKS ""...ORGANIZE in every neighbourhood, colonization plan of our Motherland... Because it is a matter of survival of Hellenism...TO TAKE BACK our lives and the lives of our children!!!! (FC Facebook Page, 18.07.2020)

> " We do not care where the (uncivilized burning migrants) and stoning those who go to their rescue. DEPORT EVERYONE NOW. First, we will save GREECE and the Greeks and then we will see about the rest. WE HAVE TOLERATED YOU ENOUGH. . . . " (F C Facebook Page, 08.0

> " In Evros, on the islands and inland, Gr homeland." (Post refers to the prosecutio land and sea borders with Turkey-FC Facebook Page, 19.09.2020)

The radical right also establishes links between immigration and criminal activity as well as unemployment (Mudde, 2019). This is the case with the FC who frame immigrants as the most significant criminal threats to the "native" Greek population. Migrants are blamed for all types of criminal activity including theft, burglaries, destruction of public spaces, religious monuments and cemeteries, physical violence, rape as well as sexual abuse of underage children. The following posts best summarize the views of the FC on this topic:

> "NO" to the illegal immigrants and their draconian protectors, who have filled Lesvos with drugs and made our businesses and our homes breeding grounds of daily crime." (FC website, 27.07.2020)

> "Why should I have to host and pay for people who believe that women should be raped and beaten and that the heads of infidels should be cut off?" (FC Facebook Page, 09.09.2020)

In accordance with the ethnic nationalist opposition to multiculturalism (see previous paragraphs) a main argument of radical right groups is that mainstream parties promote multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism which erodes the national values and creates a "one world civilization" (Faye, 1981). This argument is evident in the FC's criticisms of the government:

"This is the multiculturalism you want, Mr our country". (FC Facebook Page, 28.07.202[2])

Fennema (2004, 3) argues that all radical right movements reject government policies that support the rights and presence of migrants. They aim for the creation of monocultural states through the removal of "foreign "groups. The wider PhD research underpinning this article found that the FC strongly oppose immigration policies that allow entry for those they frame as "threatening." The government is repeatedly accused of being "anti-Hellenic" and a conspirator to the replacement of the native population (Galanaki, 2025). Another argument of the radical right is that migrants abuse welfare systems to the expense of the "native" citizens. Stemming from ethnic nationalism, this argument relates to the view that welfare should be available exclusively to the "native" group (Kitschelt, 2007). The FC do not focus on immigrant welfare access but rather argue that their presence undermines the quality of life and safety of Greek nationals. Posts reflecting this include:

"This situation of living in ghettos, Islamic neighbourhoods with an oriental lifestyle cannot continue" (FC Facebook Pa[ge,]

"We ask to live with dignity and not to undignified and offensive (FC Facebook Page, culture a[nd] 14.07.2020)

The far-right further argues that immigrants receive preferential treatment in employment, citizenship, public support, and education. This argument stems from the belief that Ethnocracies should be established, where the "native" group is dominant across all societal sectors. Pluralism and equal rights for "non-natives" are seen as incompatible with this vision (Betz, 2005; Bar-On, 2013, 138). The FC's rhetoric reflects this view, asserting that state

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[2] Caption of a video showing refugees allegedly burning an olive trees field in Moria.

policies favour immigrants over Greek citizens, particularly in matters of criminality and COVID-19 restrictions, using phrases such as "the law seems to only apply to the Greek citizens." This is illustrated in the following posts:

> "The law is applied with particular sever
> applied to Graeculi and illegal[3] invaders"

> "For the first time in the history of the
> ancestors were abolished, while illegals a
> Facebook Page, 05.10.2020)

Last, the European radical right rejects the EU which is seen as a threat to both sovereignty and national homogeneity. Through binding competences, the EU is perceived to undermine national independence (Rodriguez-Aguilera de Prat 2013, 14). Moreover, its promotion of multiculturalism and immigrant rights opposes the radical right's vision for ethnically homogeneous nation-states (Griffin, 2003). The FC adopt this view and consistently argue that the EU is facilitating the settlement of Muslim immigrants, who are endangering European security and values:

> "...The best illustration (referring to the picture attached below) of the current
> migrant situation in Europe! European institutions and European courts, created
> to protect Europe and its citizens, are being used as weapons against Europe!"

---

[3] Graeculi: The Latin term used by Romans to refer to Greeks when they occupied Greece. Nowadays, the term is used to describe somebody who is Greek but does not deserve to own a Greek ethnic identity, a degenerated Greek, commonly "enslaved" to foreigners.

(FC Facebook Page, 31.10.2020)

Set of pictures retrieved from the FC Facebook page:
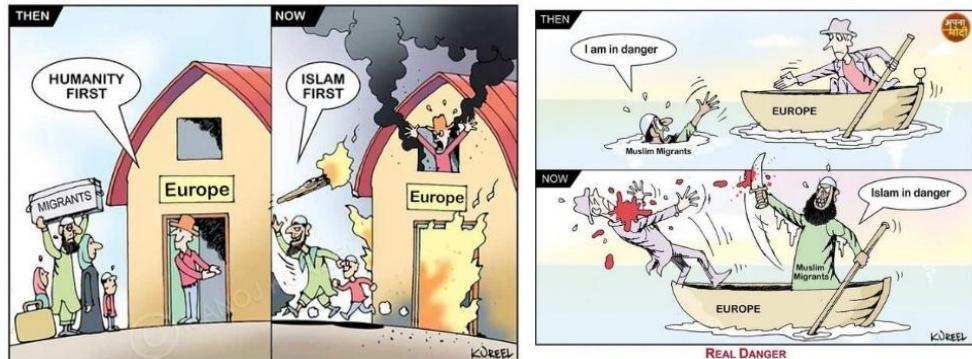
(FC Facebook Page, 02.11.2020)

The first caricature originates from French artist Ikene, created amid debates on French secularism and the perceived threat of radical Islamism to secular values. This was established through a Google image search that revealed the original image with the artist's signature. The FC's version is cropped, removing the signature, suggesting the party did not obtain it from the original source. Likewise, the second set of images was initially published by Kureel, an Indian artist known for anti-Islam caricatures. All three images have been reposted widely across global social media, making it impossible to determine the exact source from which the FC retrieved them.

Last, the entirety of the aforementioned ideological messages not only reflect the radical right character and ethnic nationalist ideas of the FC but also constitute conflict narratives linked to the historically hostile Greek Turkish relationships (Demetriou, 2012; Bar-Tal et al., 2014). These narratives justify conflict as necessary to remove the threat posed by immigrants and

refugees and restore safety (references to immigration as invasion, colonization, and war), dehumanize and delegitimize immigrants and refugees (illegal aliens, criminal elements), glorify the in-group (Greek values as superior, a heroic past), present the in-group as the sole victims (unfair treatment of Greek nationals, victimization through immigrant criminality and cultural deterioration), and promote in-group unification to eradicate the threat (calls for Greeks to "wake up" before "it's too late").

The FC commonly portray immigrants and refugees as a continuation of the historical enemy, Turkey, framing them as "weapons" of Turkey and spies of the Turkish secret services (Galanaki, 2025). These narratives re-evoke historical trauma among the collectively victimized population of Lesvos, largely composed of first- and second-generation refugees of the Smyrna Catastrophe of 1922, one of the main events of the Greek Turkish war of that period (Demetriou, 2012). Such narratives diminish empathy towards the out-group and morally legitimize political violence as protection against re-enslavement. In doing so, they reinforce patriotism, mobilize the public against migrants, and enable the FC to gain support by presenting itself as willing and capable of protecting Lesvos from the existential threat of immigration (Galanaki, 2025; Buljubašić and Holá, 2021).

Strategies of Denial of Racism Employed by the FC

Despite employing the main arguments of radical right organizations, the FC deny any association with far-right ideas. The content analysis revealed 15 posts coded under "Denial of Far-Right Character," in which the FC deny accusations made by local media, left-wing activists, and political parties that describe them as fascists or extremists. Denial is a common feature of far-right actors as it serves the function of positive self-representation and identity construction (Van Dijk, 1992). According to Van Dijk's (1992) work on the denial of racism, far-right groups often deny accusations of prejudice by presenting themselves as rational and objective, claiming that their views are based in 'facts' rather than hatred. These discursive strategies aim to justify and normalize xenophobic views as factual realities. This is particularly evident in the case of the FC as they employ the strategy of 'turning blame into credit' by reframing accusations of fascism as attacks against patriotic, fact-based concerns (Hansson, 2015). For example, a post states:

> " T h i s   i s   w h a t   w e   w a n t e d   t o   p r e v e n t   o n   T u e
> the patrols, but the pro-Turkish local websites called us fascists who unfairly accuse
> the "poor" children of setting fires. *ö* (**Reposted from a private profile,** FC
> Facebook Page, 25.07.2020).

This post refers to a series of fires on the island, for which refugees were held responsible. In response, the FC, along with residents, organized vigilante patrols to prevent further incidents. In this context, the FC deny their far-right character through discourses that highlight their personal qualities. They employ 'appeal to modesty' by framing their activities as a way to protect citizens and property. They also employ 'appeal to the people' as the discourse of protection generates emotions of fear and insecurity to their audience.

Another strategy of denial evident in this post is counterattack, which involves both 'negative other representation' and 'accusing the accuser' (Wodak, 2006). The FC engage in victim-perpetrator reversal (projection onto others) as they justify their vigilante patrols by arguing that immigrants were allegedly involved in criminal activity. In this manner, they are rationalizing their actions. They also discredit their opponents through 'argument to the person', suggesting that the newspaper labelling them as fascist is pro-Turkish. This way, the media's claims are presented as an illegitimate critique and propaganda from "the enemy" (i.e., the Turkish) and are dismissed as misinformation rather than objective reporting. The description of media as "pro-Turkish" in efforts to dismiss them also constitutes a conflict narrative related to the historically hostile Greek Turkish relationships. The case is the same with this post:

> " H e r e   t h e   l o c a l   N G O   " S T A N D   B Y   M E   L E S V O S "   migrants (!!!), while in the comments of their post, (name of commenter) takes the side of the invaders and accuses the locals as fascists who may have started the fires themselves!!! .''(FC Facebook Page, 09.09.2020)

Here, the FC avoid directly addressing the accusations of violence and instead shift the focus toward discrediting the opponent's claims of fascism. This is done by portraying the NGO as aligned with immigrants and refugees who pose an ethnic and criminal threat to the natives. Similarly, in another post reposted by the FC, the author argues:

> " T h e   a c c u s a t i o n   o f   b e i n g   r a c i s t ,   e x t r e m e , to make you submit. When someone tells you such accusations, psychological defence mechanisms are automatically created within you to defend yourself. Greeks are famous for their hospitality and these accusations are insults that can send anyone who utters them against us to court. Racist, extreme, and xenophobic

is anyone who wants to impose on local communities the settlement of people from
other countries, cultures, and religions, while the majority of the natives disagree.
Anyone who wants to help illegal immigrants should go to their country with them
and help them build a better future for their country, full of humanity, peace, love,
a n d   s o l i d a r i t y . ”   (F C   F a c e b o o k   P a g e ,   1 2 . 0 9 .

What is evident in this post is the denial of racism through the legitimization strategy of *moral
evaluation*. Specifically, the FC suggest that labelling someone as a fascist is a manipulative
linguistic trick intended to pressure the public into submission. The post presents xenophobia
as necessary for the preservation of the Greek identity, in that manner legitimizing and
normalizing prejudice. At the same time, the post reinforces positive self-representation by
referring to the long-standing Greek tradition of hospitality. The *shift-blame* strategy is also
present here as anti-racist activists are reframed as racists towards the "native" Greek
population.

In two posts, the FC defend themselves against accusations of far-right extremism by arguing
that the government employs linguistic distortions (discrediting-the-opponent technique). They
argue that terms like "fascist" are strategically used to stop the public resistance to immigration
policies, such as the establishment of new migrant camps. According to the FC, such labels
present realistic, wider concerns as the views of a radical minority. To deny their far-right
character, the FC appeal to broader public opinion, frequently referring to "the people" and
"Lesbians" to highlight that their views represent the majority. These posts support the FC's
anti-government stance which was identified as part of the wider PhD study, where they
accuse the government of lying and dismissing public concerns about safety and identity by
framing them as extremist.

“ P .   S . . .   D o n ' t   t a k e   t h e   p e o p l e   f o r   g r a n t e
T R I C K S   l i k e   e x t r e m i s t s   a n d   f a s c i s t s ,   y o u   w
16.09.2020)

“ T h e   P r i m e   M i n i s t e r   s t a t e d   t o d a y :   " . . . t h e
Lesvos. I want to send this message in all directions. And to some of the extremists
who do not represent the majority of the island. The islanders are right to complain.
But we w i l l   t u r n   t h e   p r o b l e m   i n t o   a n   o p p o r t u n
extremists under ND. Lesbians are not extremists because they don't want a

PERMANENT STRUCTURE on the island. Enough at last. Uninhabited islands and d e p o r t a t i o n s ! ! ! ! ” (F C   F a c e b o o k   p a g e ,

Finally, the denial of a far-right character by the FC is strategic. After the designation of GD as a criminal organization, the arrival of far-right extremists from Europe to assist in vigilante patrols, and the overall climate of violence on the island, openly admitting a far-right ideological background could damage the party's reputation and legitimacy due to the established relationship between the Greek far-right and violent, criminal activity. It is reasonable to assume that such an association would negatively affect both their popularity among the public and their current position as a municipal political party. By employing the aforementioned argumentation techniques of denial of racism, the FC attempt to present their views as factual and rational rather than biased. This strategy allows them to have wider public appeal by appearing neutral and as such, gaining support from voters who do not want to be associated with the far-right. As studies by Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) and Leets (2001) have shown, far-right organizations adopt moderate language and denial strategies to construct a rational image, distancing themselves from extremism and criminal activities. This way, they attract supporters who hold xenophobic views but reject the extremist label.

Conclusion

This article explored the ideological background and strategies of denial of racism of the Free Citizens Municipal Party of Mytilene, based on both data collected from the FC Facebook page and existing literature on the far-right. It first established the association between the Free Citizens (FC) and far-right ideology by examining the organization's adoption of ethnic nationalism and the extent to which their discourse aligns with the seven key arguments commonly employed by far-right organizations. The FC are identified as a radical right, rather than an extreme right, organization, as their views are aligned with the radical right while they also participate in democratic processes as an official municipal party in Mytilene, which the extreme right typically rejects (Mudde, 2019).

The article also analysed the strategic denial of far-right identity by the FC, a common practice of contemporary far-right movements. Through the examination of specific discursive strategies, such as moral legitimization, appeals to rationality, victim-perpetrator reversal, discrediting of opponents, and blame-shifting, the article demonstrated how the FC construct a rational public image that distances them from extremism while continuing to promote

xenophobic views. These strategies allow the party to present its beliefs as factual and rational rather than biased and as such legitimize and expand its appeal in the local context of Lesvos.

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Preliminary insights into resource gaps and support needs for Minor Attracted Persons: Early findings from an ongoing qualitative study

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Abstract: Minor Attracted People (MAPs) remain a highly stigmatised population, and little is known about their self-identified support needs. Limited qualitative research has examined MAPs' lived experiences in the context of creating a user-led support program. This paper presents preliminary insights from an ongoing doctoral study, based on 23 interviews with participants recruited through online peer-support platforms. Several consistent themes were observed, such as early awareness of attraction, reliance on peer communities, ambivalence around disclosure, and significant mental health struggles. Fear of discovery was described as a major barrier to seeking support, and participants highlighted the need for accurate, non-stigmatising information to help with safe coping mechanisms and support positive identity development. These early findings suggest a need for the development of targeted services for MAPs.

Key Words: Minor Attracted Persons (MAPs); Wellbeing; Lived Experience; Support Services; Stigma

Introduction

Minor attracted people (MAPs) are individuals who are attracted to children or young people below the age of consent. The term has been adopted to reduce the stigma associated with labels such as paedophilia and hebephilia, as well as to highlight the fact that attraction is not automatically coupled with offending behaviour. In fact, evidence demonstrates that child

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sexual attraction and offending are not synonymous, and current efforts often overlook those who experience these attractions but have not acted on them (Dombert *et al.*, 2016; Joyal and Carpentier, 2021; Murphy, 2024). This is a crucial issue as MAPs are a highly stigmatised group in society who experience the consequences of labelling (Becker, 1973) and moral panics (Cohen, 1972) which have significant implications for both their wellbeing and for wider prevention efforts of sexual offending behaviour (Stelzmann *et al.*, 2022). Existing literature highlights that stigma creates significant barriers to help-seeking behaviours and engagement with mental health services, leaving many MAPs isolated and unsupported (Levenson and Grady, 2019a). This raises questions about how MAPs can be best supported in ways that are both ethically sound and socially acceptable, and potentially effective in reducing potential harm. Research shows that MAPs often reach out to traditional methods of addressing mental health needs with poor outcomes due to a variety of reasons, including lack of clinical expertise with this population and stigma (Blagden *et al.*, 2018; Cantor, 2014; Levenson and Grady, 2019a; Murphy, 2024; Stevens and Wood, 2019). Understanding these individuals' experiences and creating targeted, stigma-free support mechanisms could shift the focus from post-offence interventions to preventative strategies that protect both children and MAPs from harm (Murphy, 2024).

Research on MAPs is developing rapidly, and more resources are being created to address their perceived needs (e.g., Troubled Desire, Help Wanted, ReDirection). However, the current interventions have a strong focus on prevention, which may not appeal to some MAPs who might not be seeking help against potential sexual offending but rather seeking help with general mental health. The success of these projects (e.g., the Dunkelfeld Project in Germany and Stop It NOW in the UK) demonstrates that there is a global demand for these types of services and that engaging with individuals before any offending behaviour occurs has significant value. However, despite these programs, a lack of research remains in exploring the individual perspectives of MAPs on what kind of resources and support they would find most valuable. Additionally, there is a notable gap in programs and resources built in collaboration with the MAPs community, which would ensure that resources accurately address the broader needs of MAPs.

This study seeks to address that gap by exploring adult MAPs' lived experiences and self-identified needs through in-depth interviews. This study is part of a larger project with the overarching aim being to inform the development of user-led resources that will promote MAPs' wellbeing while also contributing to harm prevention. These resources could then be further developed to target individuals in adolescence. In fact, MAPs have indicated that their

attraction started to manifest in adolescence, which generated a variety of mental health issues as a result (Murphy, 2024). At this stage, formal transcription and analysis of the data are ongoing. Therefore, this paper presents preliminary insights observed during the data collection process. These observations show recurring patterns raised by participants and offer early insight into some of the issues and concerns important to MAPs.

Literature Review

Globally, it is estimated that there are 650 million (1 in 5) women and girls and between 410 and 530 million (1 in 7) men and boys who have experienced sexual violence during childhood (United Nations Children's Fund, 2024). These figures suggest a need for innovative approaches to address this global issue from a preventive standpoint. Research on child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention highlights the importance of providing services tailored to individuals with minor attractions before they could potentially offend, emphasising that proactive support could significantly reduce CSA cases in communities (Levenson and Grady, 2019a). Media reports of these individuals often refer to them as paedophiles and fail to make a distinction between the actuarial definition of paedophilia and what is, for the most part, intended to mean a person who has sexually offended against a child (Feelgood and Hoyer, 2008). The issue with this is that it perpetuates misconceptions within the general population about what constitutes paedophilia.

Minor Attracted People

Literature searches will reveal several terms that are associated with individuals who commit offences against children. Walker (2021) discusses that 'paedophile' is a term which is often mistakenly utilised to discuss this population, whether that be by the media or even criminological research (e.g. Jenkins, 1998; Peersman *et al.*, 2012; Pendar, 2007; Rutgaizer *et al.*, 2012). In fact, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2020) purposefully makes a distinction between paedophilia and paedophilic disorder in the 'Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders revised text' (DSM-5-TR). Paedophilia refers to a persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children without necessarily involving actions or distress, while paedophilic disorder is a diagnosable mental health condition characterised by significant distress, impairment, or behaviours related to these attractions. Some critics highlight that the definitions should further emphasise the distinction between the disorder and its associated criminal behaviour (Berlin, 2014). Indeed, the definition mentions acting upon the behaviour, but it is not the requirement for diagnosis. Additionally, the definition specifies an age range for this attraction, which is prepubescent children (13 years

or under). However, clinicians and members of that population have also indicated a further distinction, which is that of a hebephile. The term refers to an individual attracted to pubescent children under the age of consent (14 years and under). Proponents of this distinction indicate that the DSM should rename the disorder to 'pedohebephilia' with three subtypes: sexually attracted to children younger than 11 (paedophilic type), sexually attracted to children aged 11–14 (hebephilic type), or sexually attracted to both (pedohebephilic type) (Blanchard *et al.*, 2009). Irrespective of these distinctions, the term is associated with offending behaviour and stigma (Feelgood and Hoyer, 2008; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). This is further exacerbated by the media's failure to distinguish between offending labels and terms related to the sexual attraction, such as paedophilia, often sensationalising extreme cases which reinforces the public image that MAPs are violent criminals (King and Roberts, 2017). The creation of moral panics around these high-profile cases often fail to acknowledge the vast differences in the offences themselves (e.g. preferential offenders vs situational offenders; Wojcik and Fisher, 2019). Consequently, MAPs' identity is collapsed with the offence label irrespectively of whether it is reflective of their behaviour which is congruent with Becker's (1973) master status label overriding all other personal characteristics. Therefore, this has led to the emergence of this new terminology to ensure there is a differentiation for the non-offending population. The term MAPs has been surfacing in different contexts, whether that be in academic literature (e.g., Jahnke *et al.*, 2022; Stevens and Wood, 2019; Walker and Panfil, 2016) or as part of controversies (Dearden, 2023). The term has raised a number of controversies with critics highlighting the potential consequences of destigmatising paedophilia, the potential trivialisation of CSA, and the parallels that are drawn with the LGBTQ+ community regarding it being a sexuality (Walker, 2021). Nevertheless, Farmer *et al.* (2024, p. 2) indicate that the term is being utilised by researchers as "a neutral, non-stigmatising, and more accurate way of referring to people who are sexually interested in children". This is crucial, particularly when research is focused on exploring the experiences of individuals who have made a commitment to condone CSA and live offending-free lives. There are a number of online communities, such as The MAP Support Club (2025), which emphasise this as being a key factor for participation in the online support forum as part of their community rules. It is also important to note that preferences for terminology across this population vary, and some prefer to be referred to as paedophiles (if applicable) as part of reclaiming the term (Jahnke *et al.*, 2022). For the purposes of this project, the term 'MAPs' indicates individuals who are attracted to minors below the age of consent and is used as an umbrella term for paedophiles and hebephiles. It is important to note that minor attraction does not automatically exclude attraction to adults (Walker, 2021).

Stigma in Professional Settings

The stigmatisation of this population is an important aspect that influences a variety of elements that determine this population's ability to access help. As mentioned above, there is an inherent stigma associated with the terminology used to define this population, which in turn creates a reluctance to disclose this aspect of themselves (Jimenez-Arista and Reid, 2023). Non-disclosure or 'secret-keeping' in therapeutic settings has been linked with a weaker therapeutic relationship (Kelly and Yuan, 2009). For this population, the potential benefits of disclosure are dependent on the therapist's reaction (Jahnke *et al.*, 2024). Reactions to disclosure of paedophilia in fact have been shown to range from discomfort to complete refusal of treatment (Jimenez-Arista and Reid, 2023). Additionally, MAPs have indicated that previous experiences of engaging with mental health professionals revealed that many are unprepared to treat paedophilia (Jimenez-Arista and Reid, 2023), lacked understanding of the condition (Levenson and Grady, 2019a), and even held the same misconceptions as the general population (Grady *et al.*, 2019). This is concerning as the disclosure of such experiences can further reinforce the already held beliefs that therapists or other professionals are unprepared to treat paedophilia (B4U-ACT, 2011a; B4U-ACT, 2011b). The issues faced by MAPs in obtaining professional help have led individuals to seek help online in anonymous communities (Jimenez-Arista and Reid, 2023). According to Rosenmann and Safir's (2006) hypothesis, this could lead individuals to forgo seeking professional help. Evidence suggests that a large number of MAPs would want to reach out to professional help to address issues resulting from stigmatisation, such as dealing with societal negative reactions, low self-esteem, and social isolation (B4U-ACT, 2011b). Furthermore, these issues have been linked to initial realisations of pedohebephilia and the lack of support at that stage (Jimenez-Arista and Reid, 2023).

Current Interventions

In recent years, a number of interventions have been developed to support individuals with sexual attractions to children before they come into contact with the criminal justice system. The most well-known example is the Prevention Project Dunkelfeld in Germany, which offers confidential face-to-face treatment free of charge for individuals who have a partial or exclusive sexual preference in terms of paedophilia or hebephilia and are concerned about their sexual interests or behaviours. Evaluations of the project suggest there is a significant demand for this type of service (Beier *et al.*, 2009) and since 2005 the facilities have increased from one to 13 across the country (About Us, 2025). The results from the program showed that individuals had reductions in distress, improved coping strategies, and a stronger sense of control over their sexual urges (Beier *et al*, 2015). However, the success of this program is

rooted in Germany's legal model, whereby there are no mandatory reporting laws. In fact, the program is available to individuals who self-identify as at risk and to individuals who may have offended. The program has further expanded to an online self-help version called Troubled Desire, which is able to have international reach.

Other self-help resources exist, such as Help Wanted, which is specifically targeted at adolescents and young adults who show a sexual interest in underage individuals, and ReDirection, which is aimed at individuals who want to stop using child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Another intervention for CSAM is the STOP-CSAM project, which is an online chat intervention implemented in five languages (English, German, Czech, Spanish, and Portuguese). A helpline model also exists called Stop It Now!, which operates in several countries, namely, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Australia. The helplines operate independently but share a similar setup. Individuals who are concerned about their sexual thoughts or behaviours can call the helpline to discuss their concerns and will then be referred to specialised services or self-help resources. The self-help and helpline models provide a lower threshold for people to access the resources, as they do not require any formal admission to a program. Exploring the extent of available resources worldwide is a challenging task, given how difficult it can be to find them in the first place.

It is important to note that existing interventions are predominantly grounded in preventative frameworks, which may dissuade potential individuals from utilising these services. A central tenet of this project is that a service framed primarily around mental health and wellbeing, rather than solely in prevention, is likely to be more appealing and accessible to a wider array of individuals who are seeking support with minor attraction. This approach could have a twofold effect. Firstly, it could draw in individuals who are not seeking help for potentially problematic behaviours but who nonetheless require support for general mental health and quality of life, thereby enhancing their capacity to live well. Secondly, by normalising access to wellbeing services, such provision may also appeal to individuals who are at risk of offending who do not perceive themselves as such, potentially broadening the reach and effectiveness of early support. To ensure the success of such a potential resource, it is crucial to explore the lived experiences of MAPs to ensure that they are targeting the specific needs of the community.

Methodology

This research article is part of a larger doctoral thesis, centred around two main studies, which aims to inform the development of user-led mental health support resources for MAPs. Study 1 examines MAP's lived experiences, including unmet needs, resource gaps, and safety considerations; whereas study 2 will involve exploring mental health professionals' perspectives on the needs identified by MAPs, and the feasibility of implementation of such resources. The studies are sequential and interconnected; in fact, insights from study 1 will inform the development of study 2. This article reports solely on the preliminary insights of study 1, which uses a qualitative exploratory research design with semi-structured interviews to explore MAPs' lived experiences of mental health services. This design is consistent with the project's constructivist epistemological stance and interpretivist orientation, which emphasises the co-construction of meaning and attention to subjective experiences within their social and cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998). The wider project employs participatory action research (PAR) principles (Cornish et al., 2023), which in Study 1 takes the form of centring MAPs' voices and experiences as a basis for informing resource development.

MAPs are a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population, and as such, online peer-support forums were determined to be the most direct way of recruiting participants. All three forums that were contacted agreed to advertise the study to their members. Gatekeepers were used to help maintain privacy for potential participants, as it could have dissuaded some individuals from participating if the researcher was also able to see their interactions on the platforms. The gatekeepers were asked to publish an advertisement created by the researcher, which broadly detailed the study's aims and eligibility criteria, which required participants to be aged 18 or over, English-speaking, and self-identifying as non-offending MAPs. The advertisement also provided the researcher's email address for potential participants to contact the researcher for further information. Upon receiving the email, an official invitation to the study was sent with additional information, and individuals were asked if they were still interested in participating. A total of 23 participants took part and self-identified as 21 men, one trans-woman, and one woman.

This research project received ethical approval from the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences' ethics committee, and given the sensitive nature of the research, strict confidentiality and anonymity procedures were put in place, such as asking participants to use email addresses that are not connected to their personal lives. Additionally, informed consent was obtained verbally so as not to have any material with people's signatures on it. Pseudonyms to communicate via email were selected by the participants

themselves upon sending the first email, as requested in the advertisement, and any potential identifying details divulged during the interview will be removed during the transcription process. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw without needing to provide a reason up to two weeks following their interview, which no one decided to avail themselves of. While no disclosures were made of any illegal behaviour related to the attractions, a strict protocol was in place detailing that any disclosures made would be reported, and this was communicated to participants at the beginning of the interview as part of the consent process. To mitigate any potential distress arising from the interview process, participants were provided with information about MAPs' specific mental health resources following the interview. All the interviews were recorded, anonymised, and stored securely.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, and participants were able to choose between the video camera being on or off to ensure they would be comfortable during the interview process. Additionally, this helped maintain confidentiality as the majority chose not to have their cameras on. For those who did turn on their cameras, the recording of the screen was immediately deleted following the completion of the interview, and only the audio portion was retained. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, and one person chose to be interviewed a second time as they had more to discuss. The interview schedule included open-ended questions that explored the onset of attraction, peer support, mental health challenges, and perceived gaps in existing resources. At the time of writing this paper, data collection has been completed, but the full transcription and thematic analysis are still ongoing. Therefore, no formal results are being presented here, but instead, they are preliminary observations made during the interview process, which reflect recurring issues and concerns that were discussed by the participants. While they should not be taken as definitive themes, they nevertheless show important areas for discussion and provide some interesting directions for further analysis. The following section outlines these early insights, integrating them with some existing literature to consider the potential implications for the wellbeing and support needs of MAPs.

Results and Discussion

The interviews generated rich accounts of participants' lives and support needs, and, although formal analysis is ongoing, several recurring patterns were observed which evidence common experiences that appear central to participants' wellbeing and barriers to support.

Early Awareness of Attraction

Many participants described becoming aware of their attractions at a relatively young age, often around adolescence, with several people reflecting on a sense of being different as their romantic or sexual interests were not aligned with those of their peers. For those who had this realisation, there were feelings of confusion coupled with shame, which led to mental health struggles. This early awareness has been observed in prior research, whereby it seems common for MAPs to recognise their sexual interests in childhood or early adolescence (Shields *et al.*, 2020). The lack of safe, accurate, and non-stigmatising information at this stage appeared to contribute to isolation and distress, as a fear of being discovered started to take root. These observations suggest that readily available and accessible psychoeducational resources could play a crucial role in reducing anxiety and promoting healthier identity development for those young individuals who are feeling distressed. Moreover, participants frequently emphasised the importance of peer networks later in life as a way of coping with these feelings of isolation.

Peer Communities and Disclosure

Online peer-support communities were often described as spaces where, for the first time, they were able to share experiences, seek advice, and reduce feelings of isolation. These communities were emphasised as being crucial for their wellbeing as well as becoming a long-term support network. For several individuals, joining the online communities led to a sense of self-acceptance of their attraction and reduced feelings of shame. The realisation that they were not alone in having an attraction to minors provided a sense of community that they lacked in their personal lives offline. In fact, disclosure to friends or family was discussed with reservation, often stressing the vast differences in potential reactions that people can have. For some participants, disclosure to trusted friends or family members was described very positively, with the event strengthening relationships and providing a sense of relief at not having to hide it any longer. Others, however, reported negative consequences such as rejection or the breakdown of relationships and were very vocal about how the MAPs community often discourages individuals from disclosure unless the person is more or less certain of the outcome. The fear associated with disclosure was further exacerbated by the possibility that people could then pass on this information, resulting in exposure to the communities in which they live. This echoes previous studies showing that disclosure for this highly stigmatised population often involves careful weighing of risks and benefits (Levenson and Grady, 2019b).

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health struggles, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness, were common across interviews which is a consistent finding amongst this population (Stevens and Wood, 2019), showing how MAPs must manage these challenges often on their own without professional support. Participants linked these challenges to feelings of shame, social stigma, and fear of discovery. Several had engaged with professional services, but many avoided them due to concerns around mandatory reporting and fears of judgment from clinicians. These observations are in line with research showing that stigma and isolation are associated with negative mental health outcomes among MAPs (B4UAct, 2011a). This could suggest that services explicitly framed around wellbeing, rather than exclusively prevention, may be more acceptable and accessible. Additionally, this avoidance of professional help was often underpinned by their fear of discovery.

Fear of Discovery

Fear of discovery was a consistent theme across the interviews; in fact, participants described concerns about losing employment, losing family ties, or risks to their personal safety if their attractions were to become known. For some, this fear extended to become a reluctance to engage with mental health professionals, even when experiencing significant distress. Previous findings have shown that MAPs' fear of exposure can act as a powerful barrier to help-seeking (Levenson and Grady, 2019b), which links with the need for clearer professional guidelines and confidential spaces that MAPs can access without fear of punitive consequences. Closely tied to this fear was participants' desire to have more accurate and trustworthy information on their attractions for both themselves and the general public.

Need for Accurate Information

A further recurring observation concerned the lack of accurate, accessible, and non-stigmatising information readily available. Participants often relied on peer forums or self-directed online searches, which required overcoming their fear of being monitored online. Several individuals expressed a desire for evidence-based resources that could provide reassurance and practical strategies for coping with a variety of issues, ranging from general mental health to dealing with the attraction. Similarly, existing research has shown that supportive resources are very limited and hard to access (Schaefer *et al.*, 2023). Participants emphasised in particular that more educational resources are needed for the general public to better understand this attraction and help reduce stigmatisation. These reflections indicate that information provision is not only a potential preventative measure but also central to supporting MAPs in living safe, healthy, and meaningful lives.

Preliminary Implications

Taken together, these preliminary observations are consistent with existing literature and demonstrate how strongly stigma and fear of discovery have an impact on MAPs' lives (Grady *et al.*, 2019) and how they can act as a substantial barrier to wellbeing and support (Levenson and Grady, 2019b). Participants routinely expressed the need for more support resources rooted in empathy and understanding in addition to the currently existing interventions, which are often framed primarily around prevention, and therefore may not meet the wider mental health and identity-related needs of this group. As recent MAP-focused research shows, many would prioritise access to non-judgemental, wellbeing-oriented support rather than interventions narrowly targeting their sexual interests (Lievesley *et al.*, 2025; Levenson and Grady, 2019b; Grady *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, given that many MAPs first become aware of their attractions in adolescence, but lack access to accurate and affirming information, they are more likely to internalise stigma and conceal their experiences (Shields *et al.,* 2020) meaning that early psychoeducational resources designed to reduce confusion, shame and provide guidance on safe coping, self-understanding, and resilience may prove effective during this crucial identity formation stage. Moreover, given the potential for stigmatising attitudes by mental health professionals, it becomes crucial to develop additional professional training and foster empathetic practices to ensure that MAPs are addressing their mental health needs successfully (Lievesley *et al.*, 2022). This should also be coupled with training regarding disclosure policies for the relevant country and ensuring that these are clearly either communicated or available to clients.

These preliminary insights highlight three areas that future services should consider in their designs, namely early access to accurate and non-stigmatising information; providing both safe peer and professional spaces; and embedding wellbeing at the heart of interventions. By doing so, support services could become more inclusive of MAPs who wish to seek support for general mental health issues, while remaining responsive to those who are struggling with their attraction. In fact, research has shown that purely prevention-based strategies may aggravate feelings of stigma and lower the number of interactions with mental health services (Houtepen *et al.*, 2016; Jahnke *et al.*, 2014). This has criminal justice policy implications particularly regarding preventative approaches of CSA and the framing of early-intervention services. In fact, there should be a focus on addressing the barriers to seeking support by ensuring there is clear guidance regarding mandatory reporting, imbedding training for mental health professionals regarding MAPs needs, and encouragement for individuals to engage in

formal services. This will benefit both non-offending populations and those who may be at risk but are currently avoiding professional services due to fear of exposure and/or criminalisation. The next phase for this project will build on these initial insights with a formal analysis of the interviews, which will provide a deeper understanding of MAPs lived experiences, thereby strengthening the evidence base for future service design. Future research should also consider looking into comparative studies of MAPs and professional mental health services to identify areas of alignment and tensions in the expectations of support delivery in current existing interventions. Additionally, examining how MAPs themselves engage with, and help shape, emerging resources over time, which may present a more representative overview of MAPs' needs. Cross-cultural work would also be valuable to explore how service delivery or availability differs across cultural contexts, and how existing programs might be adapted internationally.

This article has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the insights presented here are based on the observations made during the interviews rather than a completed formal analysis. As such, they can provide only an initial sense of recurring patterns and cannot yet be interpreted as definitive themes. Second, the sample was recruited from online peer-support platforms, which may not be representative of all MAPs, particularly those who are more isolated or who do not engage with such communities. Third, while participants were not all men, the sample remains small and demographically limited, restricting the generalisability of these observations, and no direct comparison can be made across different genders. Finally, given the sensitive nature of the topic, the interview data provided may have been influenced by concerns about stigma; however, the anonymity measures put in place likely helped mitigate this. Despite these limitations, the preliminary observations offer valuable insights into common challenges and unmet needs, providing a foundation for subsequent analysis and further studies.

Conclusions

This study presents preliminary reflections from the first phase of an ongoing doctoral project, which explores the support needs of MAPs. Utilising 23 qualitative interviews conducted with MAPs recruited through online peer-support platforms, several recurring patterns have been observed during data collection. One of the key themes was that participants described initial awareness of minor attraction in adolescence, which generates feelings of distress due to a lack of access to supportive information. Many participants detailed the critical role of peer communities in alleviating isolation whilst simultaneously highlighting the risks associated with

exposure and disclosure. Mental health struggles, compounded by stigma and fear of discovery, were commonly discussed and often served as barriers to professional help-seeking. Participants also expressed a clear desire for accessible, non-stigmatising, and evidence-based information to continuously support their well-being and non-offending behaviour. These initial observations offer a tentative outlook, as formal analysis is still in progress; nonetheless, they provide important insights into how MAPs experience unmet needs and service gaps in existing support frameworks. Critically, initial indications suggest that a more holistic approach, explicitly centred on wellbeing and not only on prevention, could offer broader effectiveness in engaging a wider spectrum of individuals who struggle with current support frameworks. This will be further explored in future research through a comprehensive thematic analysis of these interviews, alongside studies with mental health professionals. Together, these studies aim to contribute to the development of user-led resources that are both ethically sound and practically useful with the goal of ensuring that MAPs have access to support that enables them not only to avoid harm but also to live safe, healthy, and meaningful lives.

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Lost in definition: Conceptual and practical challenges in policing cyberstalking

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Abstract: Cyberstalking is a growing concern within society, yet remains conceptually contested and inconsistently defined across law, research and practice. Cyberstalking can be understood as a pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive use of digital technologies to monitor, contact or pursue individuals. Internationally, legal frameworks have struggled to keep pace with such behaviours. Pre-digital UK stalking legislation often fails to protect victims of cyberstalking, leading to gaps in investigations and prosecution, particularly where anonymity and cross-jurisdiction issues arise. This paper examines the definitional and practical challenges arising from ambiguity in how harassment, stalking and cyberstalking are distinguished across arenas. Legal uncertainty, inconsistent policy frameworks, and discretionary policing practices contribute to fragmented responses, underreporting and missed opportunities for victim protection. Reviewing legal, academic and clinical perspectives, the paper explores how definitional debates directly influence policing responses. Engaging with these debates is vital to improving cyberstalking case recognition, strengthening victim protection, and developing coherent policing strategies. It concludes by highlighting the need for research grounded in the lived experiences of victim survivors and frontline police practice.

Key words: stalking, legislation, cyberstalking, digital abuse, policing

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Introduction

Cyberstalking is a growing concern in the digital age, exposing major gaps in the criminal justice system (College of Policing, 2024). With internet use reaching 99% among UK adults aged 16-44 years (Office for National Statistics 2020), digital communication is embedded in everyday life and significantly shapes social interaction. While digital technologies bring communication and connectivity, opportunities for abuse have also multiplied and exposed the conceptual and legislative limitations underpinning inconsistent policing of cyberstalking (Dragiewicz et al., 2018).

A central challenge in responding to cyberstalking lies in how police recognise, classify and respond to these behaviours. Research suggests officers frequently misclassify or minimise both 'traditional' stalking and cyberstalking, particularly in digital contexts (Taylor-Dunn & Erol, 2022). This affects recording, risk assessment and early safeguarding. This issue forms the central theme of this paper: lack of definitional clarity surrounding cyberstalking creates significant practical difficulties for policing.

Stalking is understood as a pattern of behaviour directed at an individual, involving repeated (two or more occasions) instances of unwanted visual and physical proximity, non-consensual communication, or threatening acts that instil fear in the victim (Wilson et al., 2022). While stalking has traditionally involved physical proximity, the increased use of digital technologies has facilitated the rise in cyberstalking whereby perpetrators exploit the internet and electronic communications to pursue their victim (Marcum et al., 2017).

There are no clear or agreed definition or criteria for cyberstalking (Nobles et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2022). Rather than a single, unified definition, the literature presents a broad spectrum of behaviours that could be classified as cyberstalking. These behaviours typically include repetitive, persistent and unwanted communication or contact targeting an individual through electronic methods, including the internet and social media (Marcum et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2014; Strawhun et al., 2013) to intimidate, threaten and harm victims. Examples include a range of perpetrator behaviours, enabled through sophisticated use of technologies, relentless phone contact (Freed et al., 2018), doxing (exposing private information without consent) (Macallister, 2017), professional and personal sabotage (Tokunaga & Aune, 2017), spoofing (impersonating by falsifying information to deceive) (Horsman & Conniss, 2015), revenge porn (Finkelhor et al., 2023), swatting (fraudulent emergency call intended to incite a police response to the victim's location) (Mery & Mery, 2021), and using social media and surveillance applications for coercive control (Todd et al., 2021).

Measuring the prevalence of cyberstalking is challenging. Firstly, due to the rapid evolution and availability of digital technologies and its covert nature. Secondly, varied definitions across legal, academic, and clinical contexts result in inconsistent understanding, recording and response (The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2019) contributing to underrepresentation in statistics (Reyns & Fisher, 2018; Stonard, 2021; Strawhun et al., 2013).

For example, there are discrepancies in definition, sampling, and differing methodological approaches across studies (Kalaitzaki, 2019). Estimates suggest that cyberstalking impacts approximately 20 to 40 percent of online users worldwide (Reyns et al., 2012; Tokunaga & Aune, 2017). Technology-facilitated abuse, including cyberstalking, disproportionately affects women (Henry & Powell., 2018), reflecting the gendered nature of technology-facilitated abuse and interpersonal violence more broadly (Enock et al., 2024). These disparities undermine prevalence rates and the ability to safeguard victims.

The Definitional Maze

Cyberstalking is linked with severe significant psychological, physiological and functional harm including, anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder, and insomnia (Kaur et al., 2021). These harms are intensified by the persistent and often inescapable nature of digital abuse, which erodes victims' sense of safety and stability (Kaur et al., 2021). However, police and prosecutors continue to struggle with identifying patterns, gathering evidence and applying existing offences highlighting the need to examine the statutory framework shaping current responses.

Statutory Framework

There is no standalone offence for 'cyberstalking' in England and Wales. Instead, cases are prosecuted under the *Protection from Harassment Act (1997) (PHA)*, including *s2* (Harassment), *s2A* (Stalking), *s4* (putting people in fear of violence), and *s4A* (Stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress). The Crown Prosecution Service, (2023a) also notes s42A (1) of the (Criminal Justice and Police Act, 2001), covering harassment of a person in their home, and racially or religiously aggravated forms of harassment under *s32* of the *Crime and Disorder Act (1998)*.

However, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the statutory definitions of 'stalking' and 'harassment' (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). Existing legislations for 'traditional' stalking is criticised

as difficult for officers to interpret, with overlapping elements that create confusion between stalking and harassment (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). This leads to missed patterns, inconsistent identification of stalking offences, and cases being charged under wrong legislation. It is, therefore, unsurprising that there is further ambiguity in digital contexts.

The Ambiguity of Harassment

The offence of stalking was introduced by the *Protection from Harassment Act (1997)* to address repeated conduct causing alarm or distress in contexts such as a neighbour dispute, workplace bullying and similar persistent behaviours (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023a). Given that most victims are stalked by their partners or ex-partners it could be argued that legislation has always been ill-suited to tackle the complex dynamics of stalking. This misalignment is evident in section one of the act which broadly prohibits harassment without defining stalking and adds ambiguity that has complicated enforcement from the outset (Bliss, 2019).

Under s1(1) the defendant must not pursue a '*course of conduct*' which (a) amounts' to harassment and (b) which they know or ought to know amounts to harassment. The '*ought to know*' is objective and amounts to harassment if a 'reasonable person' with the same information would think the conduct amounted to harassment (s1(2)). A '*course of conduct*' is defined as occurring at least two occasions (s7(3)) and causing *alarm or distress* to the victim (s7(2)).

This '*course of conduct*' requirement creates' evidential barriers in cases that do not present a clear pattern and where incidents occur in isolation (Diaz, 2022). Victims often experience escalating behaviours however, this perception rarely aligns with the legal threshold (Scott, 2020). As a result, for isolated incidents, officers must rely on alternative offences or protective measure while waiting for a pattern to emerge (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023a). This delay exposes the victim to further risk and highlights how the legal framework fails to provide timely protection (HMICFRS, 2024). This creates evidential challenges and inconsistent thresholds for prosecution (Bliss, 2019).

Two aspects contribute to confusion. First, harassment is not defined in the Act beyond reference to '*alarm or distress*', leaving the distinction between uncomfortable behaviour and a criminal pattern to the judgement of victims and individual police officers. For example, a small number of unwanted contacts is relatively common at the start or end of a relationship (e.g., De Smet et al., 2015) which makes relying solely on repetition to define harassment and

stalking questionable. Second, the requirement of conduct on '*a t   l e a s t   t w o   o c c a s i o n s*' means that a single serious incident cannot qualify, while incidents that are dispersed or varied may not be recognised as part of one '*c o u r s e   o f   c o n d u c t*' unless linked during early police investigation. Where early reports are recorded as offences, such as public order, malicious communications, threats to kill or others, later escalation becomes more difficult to reframe into a pattern of harassment or stalking. Consequently, reviews such as HMIC & HMCPSI (2017) found victims held a profound lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and recommended a separate offence of stalking.

The Evolution of Stalking

Stalking was introduced by the *Protection of Freedom Act (2012*), which inserted s2A and s4A into the *Protection from Harassment Act (1997)*. It retains the harassment framework (*course of conduct*; *knows/ought to know*; *alarm/distress*) and adds a non-exhaustive list in s2A (3) of behaviours including *following, contacting, publishing material, monitoring online use, loitering, inferring with property, and surveillance* (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). Stalking is a complex crime that may not involve direct violence but rather the threat of violence (Logan & Walker, 2017). As with harassment, there is no statutory definition of '*stalking*', leaving the boundary between harassment (*s2*) and stalking (*s2A*) unclear.

For the aggravated offence s4A of the Protection from Harassment Act (1997), the prosecution must prove stalking plus one of the two additional elements:

(i) Repeated fear or violence (the victim fears, on at least two occasions that violence will be used), or

(ii) Serious alarm or distress causing a substantial adverse effect on day-to-day activity.

The evidential threshold makes the offence dependent on proving fear, whether of *repeated violence* or of serious *alarm and distress*. The fear factor mandates that the victim feel specific emotions and fear to constitute the crime (Reyns & Englebrecht, 2013) rather than reliance on the perpetrators conduct. Yet, how fear should be defined and measured is debated (Wilcox, 1998). Fear can be conceptualised subjectively: involving emotional responses triggered by cognitive processes; feeling scared, afraid, fearful or frightened. Or objectively: considering behaviours that would cause fear in a reasonable person (Garofalo, 1981; Wilcox, 1998). This distinction between subjective and objective fear is central to assessing victim harm and the seriousness with which the offence is prosecuted (Wilcox, 1998). However, research shows

that stalking victims often experience psychological, social and practical harms without necessarily reporting fear (Storey et al., 2023; Tjaden et al., 2000; Fissel et al., 2022). This gap means some victims fall outside the legal definition, exposing fundamental flaws in existing thresholds that rely on demonstrating fear rather than recognising patterns of behaviour. Indeed, reports by HMIC & HMCPSI (2017) and HMICFRS (2024) reveal persistent confusion in applying stalking offences, with frequent mischarging between sections 2A and 4A. This undermines consistency in charging and case outcomes. In contrast, in Scotland, stalking is addressed as a standalone offence under s.39 of (*The Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act*, 2010) which avoids combining stalking and harassment and makes it easier for officers and prosecutors to recognise (Middlemiss, 2014).

In sum, existing legislation in England and Wales remains reactive and narrow, failing to reflect the complex dynamics of stalking. This has further implications for digital contexts.

Problems in Defining Cyberstalking

Where harassment is defined only in broad statutory terms, stalking is reduced to illustrative behaviours, and cyberstalking remains unrecognised in law, the phenomenon becomes 'lost in definition'. Introduced before widespread internet use*,* existing legislation was never designed to address digital harassment or stalking (Stephen, 2017). Although terms such as '*c o u r s e   o f*, '*c o n t*, *dmonitoring*', appear within the legislation, as detailed above, none make explicit reference to digital methods (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017).

The Protection from Harassment Act (1997) and its amendments were never designed to encompass technology-facilitated abuse. Consequently, police and courts rely on analogies with offline behaviour. This has resulted in misclassification, inconsistent policing, and diminished victim confidence (Bliss, 2019) and is evident in the underreporting and under recording of stalking and cyberstalking (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). Evidence from HMICFRS and HMCPSI's *Living in Fear (2017)* reveals that online behaviours were overlooked, with patterns of conduct across multiple platforms often missed. These problems are compounded by statutory overlap, which distorts the boundaries between harassment, stalking and cyberstalking.

In terms of legislation, there is further academic disagreement around *repetition* and *course of conduct.* Mirroring traditional 'stalking' some studies classify a single severe act (e.g., a credible online death threat) as cyberstalking, while others require a pattern over time or focus more broadly on distress (Wilson et al., 2022). These definitional inconsistencies influence

how prevalence is *measured,* contributing to wide variation across studies. The '*f e a r   s t a n d a r d* is also widely debated with regards to cyberstalking. A large-scale US survey showed that most cyberstalking victims did not report fear but reported distress, frustration and anger (Fissel et al., 2022). Insisting on fear ignores important dimensions of harm, creating tension between legal definitions and lived experiences.

Victims describe tactics such as perpetrators using fake social media profiles, persistent re-contact after blocking, use of spyware, GPS tracking, doxing, repeated online contact, harassment, unwanted sexual advances, online threats of violence, and identity fraud (HMIC and HMCPSI, 2017; Crown Prosecution Service, 2023a), yet these behaviours are absent from the examples detailed in existing legislation. This leaves police and prosecutors reliant on broad terms such as '*contact*' or '*m o n i t   o r i n g*' to interpret online conduct, a process that varies in cases (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023a; HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). The borderless and ubiquitous nature of the internet compounds the issues, as victims can be subjected to constant intrusion. Without explicit legal recognition, these behaviours are overlooked or treated as minor (Bliss, 2019). In practice, the law makes it easier for police to overlook cyberstalking, with police often categorising incidents under alternative offences, obscuring its true prevalence (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017).

Reliance on alternative legislation distorts official statistics and contributes to misconceptions of the issue. Depending on the circumstances, cyberstalking incidents can be placed under the *Malicious Communications Act* (1988), the *Communications Act* (2003) or the *Computer Misuse Act* (1990). These laws focus on technology, but do not capture the pattern of behaviour that characterises stalking. The *Online Safety Act (2023)* aims to regulate harmful online activity by requiring social media platforms to remove illegal harmful content and safeguard users. It is enforced by the Office of Communications (OFCOM) rather than the police (Online Safety Act, 2025) and introduces no new criminal offences. Instead, it introduces a regulatory layer rather than a substantive criminal justice response. This leaves victims of cyberstalking reliant on pre-existing legislation, such as the *Protection from Harassment Act (1997)*, a law never designed for the digital age, as detailed earlier.

International Contrast

Other jurisdictions have attempted to address challenges posed by cyberstalking. In Canada, harassment and stalking are addressed under *s.264* of the *Criminal Code (1985)* which includes electronic communications such as email, social media and other digital intrusions.

However, legislation struggles to keep pace with rapidly evolving digital behaviours, producing inconsistent police responses and evidential difficulties (Wang et al, 2025). Similar to England and Wales, Canadian statutory frameworks also lack clear distinction between harassment and stalking.

In Germany (S238 of the German Criminal Code (StGB) and Italy's 'atti persecutori' (persecutor acts) criminalises 'unwanted pursuit behaviours' without requiring physical proximity, enabling digital behaviours to be interpreted as stalking. These frameworks reduce statutory ambiguity, but challenges remain when *fear* and *distress* are used as the threshold.

In Australia, stalking laws in Queensland and Victoria explicitly include online contact, social media messages, GPS tracking and impersonation as stalking behaviours under *the Criminal Law Consolidation Act (1935)* (SA) s.19AA. In the United States, many states have specific cyberstalking laws. For example, Florida defines it as 'repeated electronic communication causing substantial emotional distress' serving no legitimate purpose. These provisions offer clear guidance for identifying digital abuse, reducing uncertainty for victims and police. However, varying thresholds across states create legal uncertainty and inconsistent protection. This brief comparison is illustrative rather than comprehensive, given the complexity of multi-jurisdictional framework. It does, however, raise the question as to whether the UK should introduce a precise, technology-specific definition to reduce reliance on broad harassment legislation and improve recognition.

Cyberstalking: Academic and Clinical Literature

Academic Definitions

Criminological and Sociological research has examined stalking through behavioural patterns and conceptual boundaries (Bocij & Mcfarlane, 2002; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). Early work, such as Meloy's (1998) historically important but now outdated contribution, framed cyberstalking as *"a paranoid tinged world of malicious an* while Spitzberg & Hoobler, (2002) described it as '*persistent and unwanted contact via techn* emphasising repeated intrusion over specific acts. Wilson et al's (2022) research found substantial conceptual variations in definitions: some require repeated behaviour, others accept a single incident; some prioritise fear, others general distress; and views differ on whether indirect tactics like impersonation or surveillance count. These disparities complicate how prevalence is measured and hinder policy developments and policing responses.

Academic debates on cyberstalking reveal significant differences and overlaps. Early work positioned cyberstalking as an extension of traditional stalking; that when stalking moves online, the behaviours become more intrusive due to technology allowing constant access, increased monitoring and the ability to cross personal boundaries (Meloy, 1998). Others later argued that cyberstalking mirrors offline stalking involving similar motives, patterns of behaviour, control and relationships (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014; Sheridan & Grant, 2007). From these perspectives, technology changes the *method* of stalking, not its *nature*. More recently, emphasis has focused on the distinct characteristics of cyberstalking, such as anonymity, persistence, impersonations, constant access, covert surveillance and wide reach that sets it apart from traditional stalking (Kaur et al., 2021, Kim, 2023). Some of these behaviours mirror coercive control in intimate or family relationships, however, cyberstalking also occurs outside those contexts, meaning it cannot be assumed to be inherently synonymous with coercive control (Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Nobles et al (2014) argue that cyberstalking victims endure longer victimisation, adopt self-protective behaviours (changing routine, avoiding social contact, quitting jobs) and face higher financial costs. Perpetrators often conceal their identity through fake profiles or untraceable accounts and victims report severe emotional consequences (Worsley et al., 2017). These factors require cyberstalking to be treated as a unique form of abuse, not subsumed under existing problematic definitions.

Further complexity lies in terminology of behaviours. Researchers use terms such as cyber-harassment, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking interchangeably, which blurs distinctions further. For instance, cyberbullying research includes impersonation, exclusion, threats and stalking (Łosiak-Pilch et al., 2022). Bussu et al. (2025) found that incidents in higher education labelled as cyberbullying often aligned more closely with cyberstalking. When cyberstalking is treated as harassment or bullying, it risks downplaying its seriousness. Again, this lack of clear terminology adds a further layer of definitional drift which hinders legal and policy responses.

These issues reinforces a need to incorporate more survivor-centred definitions that reflect lived impact rather than relying solely on narrow legal categories.

Clinical Definitions
Clinical literature on stalking has explored motivational typologies, including the rejected, intimacy-seeker, incompetent suitor, resentful, and predatory stalker (Mullen et al., 1999). However, their relevance is questioned due to their clinical focus and limited practical use. Their application to cyberstalking is also inadequate. Weekes et al (2025) question whether the existing typologies sufficiently categorise cyberstalking perpetrators arguing that they

typically lack social skills, have low self-control and use digital surveillance tactics that do not easily align with traditional typologies. (Sheridan & Grant, 2007) questioned whether cyberstalking its within existing stalking typologies or represents distinct motivations and behavioural pattern. Despite this early challenge, clinical stalking theory still remains underpeopled (Parkhill et al., 2022). Although different psychological theories such as attachment and social learning theory have been applied, none sufficiently guide diagnosis or intervention.

Psychiatry and psychology, typically define stalking by *impact* and *repetitive intrusiveness* (Mullen et al., 1999; Prabhu et al., 2019) rather than by a fixed behavioural checklist. Clinical perspectives focus on consequences such as trauma, sleep disturbances, and impaired functioning (Prabhu et al., 2019). Neither the DSM-5 nor ICD-11 (manuals to diagnose mental health conditions) recognise stalking or cyberstalking as diagnostic categories, leaving clinicians without guidance for assessing such harms. Furthermore, existing risk assessment tools do not capture online behaviours (Gamache et al., 2022). Although newer cyberstalking scales have developed, making comparisons across studies is difficult (Wilson et al (2022). The lack of standardisation leaves clinicians and police without reliable tools for identifying risk, reinforcing inconsistent recognition and recording and inadequate victim protection.

Victims often report psychological harm such as anxiety, hypervigilance, and social withdrawal due to cyberstalking (Fissel, 2021; Short et al., 2015), however, they may not necessarily identify fear, as noted earlier. From the clinical perspective, these harms are sufficient to gain recognition of cyberstalking. This contrasts with legal and operational policing perspectives which undermines consistent protection, discussed above. Without alignment, victims may receive therapeutic support but remain vulnerable to inadequate legal remedies and operational responses.

Practical Policing Challenges

Recognition and Recording: the 'Reaction to a Series of Conduct'
As discussed, cyberstalking is often treated by frontline officers as a series of unrelated incidents rather than a 'course of conduct' (HMIC & HMCFRSI, 2017). The difficulty of recognising patterns from disconnected reports is not unique to policing stalking; similar problems appear in police responses to coercive control (Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon, 2019). When cases are handled incident by incident, victims are repeatedly required to retell their

experiences to different officers, which fragments their narrative and undermines confidence in police responses.

Cyberstalking is often minimised by police, treated as isolated incidents, and met with poor responses - leaving victims feeling 'invisible' (Korkodeilou, 2014; Taylor-Dunn & Erol, 2022). Such concerns were raised in the national stalking super-complaint, where victims reported that persistent online behaviour is not taken seriously or recognised as stalking even where there is a clear pattern of behaviour (HMICFRS, 2024). While some of these failures are attributable to individual policing practices, they reflect the deeper structural consequence: without precise stalking and cyberstalking definitions frontline policing faces uncertainty in decision-making.

Identification of Cyberstalking
Police lack confidence in responding to cyberstalking. For example, a study which found officers who report confidence identifying stalking often lack confidence when behaviours occur online. Williams et al (2021) found that while 96% of officers surveyed across two British police forces felt confident distinguishing stalking from harassment, fewer reported confidence doing so in cyberstalking cases (61%). Further, almost 38% expressed low confidence in recognising cyberstalking behaviours. This raise concerns around subsequent minimisation or misclassification and poor response and ultimately leads to distorted recording and prevalence data (HMIC & HMCPSI, 2017). These challenges are exacerbated by the speed at which digital technologies and behaviours evolve.

The absence of a screening tool for cyberstalking compounds the problem. The national stalking super-complaint highlighted victims felt pressured to *prove* the seriousness of digital incidents before they were recognised as victims, especially where the cyberstalking occurred through repeated friend requests, third-party messages or impersonation accounts (HMICFRS, 2024). This suggests that police responses may rely on individual discretion and may illustrate wider misunderstandings about the seriousness of cyberstalking. Given rapid technological change, any framework based on fixed categories risks quickly becoming outdated and unable to capture novel emerging behaviours. Nevertheless, a framework that provides a stable reference point for practitioners and policymakers is needed, even if it requires regular review and adaptive mechanisms to remain relevant.

Frontline officers often lack clarity on how to capture and present social media evidence or how to approach platforms for disclosure of online activity (Wall, 2013). More recently the HMICFRS (2024) super-complaint found breaches of stalking protection orders, supported by screenshots, yet significant delays in police action. The evidential challenge is compounded as police are under pressure to regulate social media - a 'privately owned but publicly populated' environment (Wall, 2013) - leaving them dependent on the cooperation of platforms whose priorities diverge from the criminal justice system. Without a clear accessible definition of cyberstalking or official guidance on evidential thresholds, officers lack the blueprint for what to collect, from where and with what degree of urgency. This conceptual uncertainty explains operational hesitation: evidential gaps, inconsistent case-building and delayed CPS decisions, ultimately undermining and impacting the victim (HMICFRS, 2024).

Officers' knowledge, Training and Discretion
Discretion is amplified where legal definitions are vague. Without cyberstalking specific statutory or policy guidance, officers rely on professional judgement rather than specific criteria, leading to variations in responses. Korkodeilou (2014) noted victims' experiences often reflect misconceptions of stalking dynamics and over-reliance on their evidence. Taylor-Dunn & Erol (2022) found shortcomings in the use of police risk assessment tools when it comes to online abuse.

Police knowledge of what constitutes digital evidence is inconsistent. Korkodeilou (2014) found operational officers relied on personal discretion to determine what counts as digital evidence leading to variations and inconsistencies. Victims in the super-complaint described being passed between multiple officers, each unfamiliar with their cases, resulting in repeated re-telling of traumatic events and fragmented investigations (HMICFRS, 2024). Taylor-Dunn & Erol (2022) indicated that victims continue to report the same inadequate police responses, even after the *Protection of Freedom Act (2012),* introduced to close the gap between legislation and policing practice. The persistence of these failings highlights a deeper structural disconnect: officers are still expected to interpret digital behaviours through legislative and policing frameworks designed for traditional stalking, leaving core practices unchanged in how cyberstalking is recognised, recorded and assessed. Operational tools and procedures guiding officers have not been meaningfully updated to reflect the realities of cyberstalking. Without survivor-informed, adaptable tools that capture technological and contextual nuances, risk assessment will remain outdated and ineffective, failing to capture the true scope and severity of harm.

Conclusion

Cyberstalking remains 'lost in definition' within law, academia and policing. The mismatch between outdated legal frameworks and the fast-evolving nature of technology means cyberstalking as a phenomenon is consistently under-recognised and poorly risk assessed in practice. The core challenges lie in the absence of clear definitions, limitations in current legislation, and difficulties in identifying and assessing digital patterns of harm. These gaps leave victims exposed and unprotected while stalking and cyberstalking escalates. Without clear definitions and effective tools, cases are under-reported, misclassified and poorly managed. Reliance on outdated frameworks means policies fail to address technological change and lived experiences, resulting in missed opportunities for early intervention and inadequate victim protection.

Drawing on experiences as a former police officer, the lead author has witnessed how definitional ambiguity and incident-focused practices weakens effective policing responses to stalking and cyberstalking, leaving victims at risk. Building on these experiences, Tahir's doctoral research examines police officers' response to young people's experiences of cyberstalking, with the aim to bridge the knowledge gap between academia and frontline practice. By linking these perspectives, this research aims to contribute to survivor-centred policing approaches that improves recognition, safeguarding and delivers effective responses for victims.

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"Why is your student reflecting and creating?": A reflection on a creative criminology assessment.

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the design and delivery of a creative assessment for an undergraduate criminology module, Crime and Popular Culture. The assessment was intended to be inclusive, creative, and attentive to employability, but it also raised challenges concerning parity, clarity of purpose, and managing uncertainty for both students and staff. The reflection explores strategies used to support students, including dedicating significant lecture time to assessment preparation, offering one-to-one meetings, and providing clear, consistent messaging. It also considers staff perspectives, highlighting both the difficulty of marking unfamiliar formats and the invigorating benefits of encountering diverse, imaginative student work. Creative assessments are considered as something that presents practical and pedagogical challenges, but that can enrich learning, foster inclusivity, and bring enjoyment for students and educators alike.

Key words: Creative assessment, authentic assessment, assessment design, assessment reflections

Introduction

This paper takes the form of a reflective account rather than a conventional research article. Its focus is on the experience of creating a new assessment for undergraduate students and the questions, uncertainties, and compromises that emerged along the way. Designing assessment can feel like a technical exercise - matching criteria to learning outcomes, setting word counts, or choosing between formats. Yet, as this reflection shows, it is also a deeply

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personal, pedagogical, and practical act; one that forces us to articulate what we value most about student learning and how we want that learning to be expressed. In writing about this particular assessment, I hope to acknowledge both the challenges and the creative opportunities that surface when theory, practice, and pragmatism intersect. My intention is not to offer a model for replication, but to open up space for dialogue about the reflective, situated, and sometimes messy work of assessment design in higher education.

Context: the module, its learners, and the assessment

'Crime and Popular Culture' is an optional, Level 5, 15 credit, team-taught, undergraduate module that explores the complex intersections between crime, deviance, and popular culture. It is relatively new and in the two years the module has run, it has averaged 80 students on the course. Currently, the module is taken by BA Hons Criminology students (including joint honours students with Sociology, Psychology, and Law) and LLB Law students. Approximately one third of learners are LLB Law students, and roughly a third of these students have not taken criminology at undergraduate level.

The module examines how crime is consumed as a form of leisure and entertainment, while also critically interrogating popular culture as a site where dominant social discourses are both reproduced and challenged. Although topics are informed by the research interests and expertise of the teaching team, the syllabus is designed to balance breadth and depth: students are encouraged to think beyond familiar cultural spaces, while also engaging critically and rigorously with specific case studies. Subjects have included: the ethics of dark tourism and the morality of crime museums; the role of pastoral aesthetics in British television crime dramas; cinematic representations of sex trafficking; the ethics of adaptation and questions of ownership in the fictionalisation of real events; the appeal and cultural significance of True Crime podcasts; representations of sexual violence in young adult fiction; the function and limits of comedy in addressing sensitive subjects; and narrative strategies that foster empathy in contexts of "unforgivable" harm.

The module is explicitly interdisciplinary. It highlights criminology's longstanding emersion from, engagement with, and contributions to other fields, while also encouraging students to critically reflect on disciplinary boundaries and to consider the wider range of perspectives - literary, cultural, journalism, photography, and media studies - that can further enrich their criminological inquiry.

The assessment for the module is comprised of two parts in a single submission point. The first section of the assessment asks the student to create a "non-academic text" that reflects on the interests and topics of the module. A list of suggested items was provided (TikToks/Reels; Podcast; Video; Instagram page; Script; Poetry; Prose; Journalism piece(s); Advertising campaign; Listicle) with word counts/minimum item numbers/time lengths etc. Students are told that if they wish to deviate from this list, they are welcome to, but they should contact me to ensure they are producing an appropriate amount of content to fulfil the needs of the assessment. The second part of the assessment is a 2,250-2,500 word essay, where they are asked to reflect on why a criminologist might be interested in their non-academic text. Students have created work across the list and beyond; they have created fake social media business pages and branding packages for crime-themed bars, restaurants, and meal-prep services ('Fast & Last Meals' a satirical recipe box style business, critiquing true crime consumption through the literal consumption of famous death row prisoners' last meals). They have written proposals for new museums. They have made cereal packets and cocktail books. They have invented magazines and done crime-themed fashion photo shoots. Some have choreographed dances, several have composed songs. They have drawn new funko pop designs, edited footage of them partaking in mixed martial arts (and written on new ways criminology could interact with sports) and created quizzes to find out which television woman detective you are. (I was Miss Marple; I was thrilled.) Their assessments have showcased not only their creativity, but their humour, compassion, and the sheer range of their talents.

The reflective essays have also been incredibly diverse. This can be seen in differing responses to similar creative pieces. In the first year the course ran, three students wrote poems about domestic abuse. The poems had similar feminist frameworks and messaging, drawing on similar themes of voicelessness and violence, and each had a similar poetic form of approximately 14 lines. Yet the essays produced were varied. One student wrote more broadly about fictional portrayals of violence against women in television and film; another used criminological theories to analyse the poem, arguing feminist literary analysis could benefit from criminology; and the final student examined how criminology had (and hadn't) considered poetry, arguing it was an important form for criminologists to analyse. Three similar poems begat three very different essays, demonstrating the creativity and critical thinking in their academic reflection as well as in their non-academic pieces.

Assessment design

Justification: creativity, inclusion, authentic assessment, and employability

The assessment was designed with the intention of being inclusive, creative, and attentive to employability. As such, it may adhere to the concept of 'authentic assessment', depending on your chosen academic definition[i]. Many universities are embracing 'authentic assessment' as a means of increasing employability and attempting to dissuade the use of Generative AI. One of the primary motivations for designing a creative assessment was the recognition that it allows students to express their creativity in ways not easily captured by traditional academic tasks. Conventional essays and reports often require students to demonstrate knowledge within established forms, privileging argument, structure, and citation. While these are important skills, they do not always leave space for the imaginative, playful, or experimental aspects of student learning. Creative assessments can open this space, enabling students to take risks and explore ideas through forms that engage different kinds of thinking. In doing so, it can expand the scope of what can "count" as valid academic work.

A further rationale lies in the opportunity to allow students to demonstrate skills that might not otherwise surface in the classroom. Some students have strong abilities in performance, design, or storytelling, but these remain hidden when assessments are limited to written essays. By providing options, assessments can tap into a wider range of literacies, affirming not only the value of diverse talents but also giving students a greater chance to succeed by drawing on their strengths. It also reflects more accurately the complexity of communication, which takes many forms.

Creative assessments also provide students with a chance to foreground what matters to them personally. Traditional assessments can constrain students within the boundaries of set questions or narrowly defined topics. In contrast, creative formats can allow greater flexibility for students to bring their own interests, identities, and concerns into the work. This can create an engaged form of learning, as the assessment becomes meaningful beyond the classroom. It also makes it possible for students to speak in different voices (using irony, humour, narrative, and emotion) in ways that academic prose can discourage. These alternative registers encourage students to approach knowledge in different, nuanced and multifaceted ways, often producing work that is powerful and memorable. By legitimising these voices, creative assessments have the potential to foster inclusivity, affirming that students can demonstrate understanding not only through traditional academic discourse but also through imaginative expression.

Employability was another consideration in the design of the assessment. While this was not the sole rationale, recognising the links between creative tasks and workplace relevance helped frame the assessment to students as both rigorous and meaningful.

The development of this assessment was also partially born out of engaging with the Lancaster Law School Skills Project, led by Tina McKee, Kathryn Saban, and Dr Sadie Whittam[ii]. This project examined the skills law and criminology students are currently taught, as well as the skills they might need in future academic and professional contexts. They engaged with four key groups: employers, current students, alumni, and current Law School teaching staff, asking each to reflect on the skills they learnt/taught/prized. Engaging with this project prompted me to reflect more deeply on both the design of the assessment and how I presented it to students. When detailing the assessment in a lecture, I emphasised the potential links to employability and presented it as a chance to demonstrate skills they might find helpful for job applications and interviews. I spoke about the assessment as not only providing an opportunity to demonstrate specific skillsets – copy writing, social media, branding – but broader skills that apply to nearly all roles, such as adapting communication styles and tone of voice, problem-solving, digital literacy, and project management. However, it is also important to stress that employability was not the sole purpose of such assessments. Overemphasising employability may unintentionally signal to students that the intrinsic value of creativity, reflection, and experimentation is secondary, or that academic work is worthwhile only if it leads directly to a career advantage. By balancing employability with broader intellectual and personal growth (both of which I would argue are also helpful skillsets for making socially engaged and ambitious graduates, in and out of the workplace), we sought to affirm that creative assessments serve multiple purposes.

Equivalence in variety

Designing assessments that offer students multiple modes of expression can present a significant challenge when it comes to ensuring parity. How many pages of script is the equivalent of a short video? How many Instagram posts is comparable to a polished poem? Each option calls upon distinct skills, conventions, and outputs. For example, a TikTok only be a minute long but require multiple hours of filming, editing, and rehearsing, while a script might span several pages of dialogue and demand a strong grasp of narrative structure. A poem may be brief on the page, yet require a high level of precision, creativity, and revision to be effective.

Ensuring that assessments are equitable is vital not only for fairness but also for academic integrity and the quality of student learning. Without clear expectations for scope and depth, I was concerned that some students might not engage fully with the task, while others might devote too much time to the assessment. Through attempting to set clear expectations, I wanted to create a space that not only discouraged under-engagement but enabled excellence, allowing students to showcase their skills and ambitions.

When faced with the challenge of establishing parity across such diverse assessment formats, I sought information from institutional guidelines and support. Universities often provide frameworks on assessment design. However, these resources tend to operate at a level of abstraction, emphasising broad concepts such as transparency, equity, and alignment with learning outcomes, rather than offering concrete equivalences between tasks of different genres or modalities. For example, while guidance may stress the importance of consistent criteria, it rarely specifies how a fashion photo shoot might be compared to a short film.

Speaking to specific disciplines, subject areas, and lecturers may be of more use than broader institutional guidance. I found it helpful to reach out to disciplinary experts in creative writing, marketing, and media studies to better understand how they approach the evaluation of diverse forms. These areas have a long-standing familiarity with artefacts such as scripts, social media campaigns, visual products, and performance pieces, and have established ways of recognising creativity while engaging with ideas of assessable equivalence. However, I also realised that the recommendations I encountered could not be applied uncritically to my own context as much of the guidance was of course designed for students immersed in those disciplinary practices. For students outside these fields, achieving comparable outcomes might demand additional time and independent study. This recognition underscored the need to adapt such models carefully, ensuring that students are not placed at a disadvantage simply because they must devote more effort to understanding the conventions of a format that is not their own.

This aspect of the assessment was the one that caused me the greatest concern when creating the assignment. I spoke to a lot of people and took advice from wherever I could. I had several people suggest that I narrow the options on the assessment to make life easier in this regard, but I was disinclined to do so due to the variety being key to the assessment's origin. Ultimately, I concluded that it is near-impossible to design an assessment that demands an equivalent investment of effort across all students. Experience shows that some learners devote many hours to a task yet still struggle to achieve a passing grade, while others appear

to invest relatively little time and consistently attain the highest marks. Even with conventional formats, such as a 2,000-word essay, there will always be variation: some students will spend weeks drafting and revising, while others may complete the work in a single evening. Despite these differences in process, both groups may achieve comparable outcomes.

I chose to share the draft assessment with colleagues in order to gather feedback and trial the approach. I was fortunate that my department had a formal process in place, whereby assessments were reviewed by an Assessment Officer to ensure clarity and consistency across modules. This process not only yielded constructive feedback that helped me refine the assessment design, but also provided reassurance that my approach was pedagogically sound and aligned with departmental standards.

Despite having undergone multiple stages of review, the assessment nonetheless contained an error that, in retrospect, appeared quite evident. In designing tasks focused on written outputs (such as journalism pieces or fictional prose) I had defaulted to word count as the primary measure of scope and consequently assigned an inappropriately high word count for poetry. When several students expressed interest in submitting poems but stated they didn't think they could make the word count, I addressed this issue by granting a formally recorded dispensation for a reduced word count and ensured that this adjustment was clearly communicated to the marking team. The assessment was amended for the following year.

In the period between the formalisation of the assessment and its delivery to students, I became aware of my own frustration at the absence of straightforward, accessible guidance on the 'right' approach to designing such tasks. This uncertainty was accompanied by a sense of vulnerability, as I questioned how my decisions might be received by others - whether they might be judged inadequate or incorrect. I recorded these reflections in the module preparation documents, both as a means of acknowledging my own position and as a reminder to approach student uncertainty with empathy. I had confidence in the capacity of students to produce innovative and impressive work; however, the fact that I had designed the assessment yet still experienced feelings of insecurity led me to consider how much more acute such feelings might be for students facing formal evaluation of their performance.

"Easier" option

When designing the assessment, a conscious decision was made to include an option that was perceived as easier or more familiar, in order to create a sense of safety for students. While the value of experimentation is high, it was important to recognise that not all students

would feel comfortable taking risks in a high-stakes context. I chose to include the option of a listicle (a blog where a list is a key component, such as 'Top 10 TV lawyers' or 'Gifts for your crime-obsessed girlfriend') and devoted time and attention to them in the lectures so students would know they were a viable option.

This sense of safety served several purposes. It reduced the likelihood that students would disengage out of fear or uncertainty, thereby ensuring greater inclusivity. It also respected different learning preferences, acknowledging that creativity can manifest in multiple ways and does not always require novelty of form. Most importantly, I thought the presence of an easier option would help establish trust: students could see that the assessment was designed to challenge without overwhelming them. In practice, this balance encouraged students to make more confident choices, with some embracing creative risks precisely because they knew a safer alternative was available.

Clarity of purpose

Clarity of purpose is essential when both setting and marking a creative assessment. Without a clear articulation of what the task is designed to measure, students may misinterpret the expectations, and staff may struggle to apply criteria consistently. In this case, the primary purpose was not to evaluate students on their ability to execute a creative product to a professional standard, but rather to assess their understanding of the conventions of genre and their ability to engage critically with them. For example, a student creating a magazine cover was not expected to demonstrate the skills of a professional designer, but understand the conventions of layout (masthead, cover image, consistent branding etc).

Being explicit about this purpose in advance also helped to reduce student anxiety. Many students feared that they were being judged as though they were professional filmmakers, novelists, or marketers, when in fact the emphasis lay on their knowledge and critical use of genre conventions. Reinforcing this distinction during the marking process ensured fairness, as work was assessed against learning outcomes rather than subjective notions of artistic merit. In this way, clarity of purpose preserved both rigour and inclusivity in the assessment.

Managing student uncertainty

Managing student uncertainty was a central consideration in the delivery of the creative assessment, as unfamiliar formats often generate anxiety about expectations and standards. To address this, support was embedded at multiple levels: lectures were used to clarify

requirements and practise relevant skills; one-to-one meetings provided personalised reassurance and tailored guidance; and consistent student messaging reinforced key information and expectations. Together, these approaches aimed to reduce ambiguity, build student confidence, and create a supportive learning environment in which uncertainty could be acknowledged and managed productively rather than left to undermine engagement with the assessment.

Lectures

In most modules at my institution, it is normal to devote one or two lectures to the assessment. For this module, however, I devoted far more lecture space. I wanted the student to not view the assessment as a mere endpoint but as an integral part of the learning journey. By embedding assessment preparation into lectures, I was able to demystify expectations, walk through criteria, and create a shared sense of what was being asked. This helped reduce uncertainty and allowed students to focus their energy on demonstrating the intended learning outcomes rather than trying to decode the task itself. I found this especially important for creative and unfamiliar formats, which some students found intimidating or opaque. Using lecture time to explore examples, unpack rubrics, and model possible approaches gave students a much clearer idea of what was expected.

A particularly effective strategy was to design interactive tasks that mirrored the skills students would need in their assessments. For example, we used the lecture space to facilitate the collaborative development of a class-created secondary reading list on the topic of the week. This activity required students to work in pairs to identify and digitally share sources that extended beyond the core readings, encouraging them to explore scholarship from cognate disciplines and to bring diverse perspectives into the discussion. In doing so, students were able to practise essential research skills, such as evaluating the relevance and credibility of sources, while also considering how different disciplinary approaches could illuminate our subject matter in new ways. The process often led to productive connections between older canonical texts and contemporary debates, as students highlighted how longstanding ideas might be reinterpreted in light of present concerns. Many students expressed concern about writing an academic essay on contemporary issues, particularly because they feared that relevant scholarly literature had not yet been published. The process of building connections between established texts and emerging debates helped them to recognise that existing academic literature could still serve as a critical framework. By drawing on theories, concepts, and methodologies from earlier work, students were able to position their analyses in dialogue with scholarship, even when addressing subjects (television shows, TikTok trends, topics of

cultural debate) that had not yet received direct academic attention. In this sense, the class-created secondary reading list became more than a repository of sources; it was a scaffold for building both confidence and skill in approaching the assessment. Students left with not only a wider set of materials to draw upon but also with a clearer sense of how to position their work in relation to broader conversations, whether disciplinary, historical, or cultural.

The lectures also created space for dialogue. Students were able to raise questions in a shared setting, which often revealed common points of confusion. These moments normalised uncertainty, showing students that it was acceptable to seek clarification. I found that this openness helped build a sense of community, as students supported one another and saw me as approachable in navigating the demands of the assessment.

Finally, devoting lecture time to preparation reinforced the idea that assessments were not disconnected hurdles but integrated parts of the curriculum. Students could see the alignment between what was taught, what was practiced, and what they would ultimately be assessed on. Although at first it seemed like this might come at the expense of content delivery, I came to recognise that it strengthened the overall learning experience: students were better equipped to demonstrate their knowledge and skills with confidence and purpose.

One to one meetings
Students frequently expressed uncertainty about whether their ideas were "good enough" or whether they met the assessment criteria. By arranging individual meetings, I was able to provide a structured space in which students could seek reassurance that their chosen direction was valid and aligned with the intended learning outcomes. These meetings also became a valuable opportunity for formative support. Unlike more conventional written tasks, creative outputs such as poetry, video, or social media projects left some students unsure about scope, conventions, or equivalence to other formats. Meeting individually meant I could respond directly to the specific challenges of each project, clarify expectations, and guide students towards achievable outcomes. This process seemed to reduce anxiety and gave students confidence that they were on the right track.

Just as importantly, the meetings allowed me to provide relational as well as academic support. Some students interpreted the openness of creative assessment tasks as a lack of structure, which could intensify feelings of self-doubt. Talking with them one-to-one created space to affirm the value of their ideas while also offering practical guidance. In turn, this seemed to enhance their motivation, as seeing my enthusiasm for their ideas it appeared they

felt their work was being taken seriously and supported. For me, these conversations underscored how one-to-one meetings can function as both pastoral and pedagogical interventions, helping to ensure that creative assessments are experienced as opportunities for growth rather than as sources of unnecessary stress.

While the one-to-one meetings were beneficial, they were also undeniably time consuming. The open-ended nature of creative assessments meant that students often brought highly individualised questions, so no two meetings were alike and each required careful attention. The emotional importance of having their ideas validated meant that even when questions were more straightforward, they could still take time. Although I valued the relational and pedagogical benefits these conversations offered, I am conscious of the considerable workload they generated and the challenge of sustaining this approach in the long term, especially in larger cohorts. I found, however, that the amount of time needed by students decreased in the second year due to the availability of examples from the last year and more guided, dedicated assessment lectures.

Messaging

One practical way we decided to promote certainty was to designate a single member of staff as the primary point of contact for student queries. This approach was an attempt to ensure that communication remained clear, consistent, and authoritative. I worried that when multiple staff members field questions independently, there was a risk of providing students with conflicting interpretations of assessment criteria, requirements, or expectations. Such discrepancies had the possibility of causing confusion and undermining both student and staff confidence in the assessment. By contrast, I hoped that a single voice allowed for clarity, reduced ambiguity, and ensured that all students were working from the same information base. This was felt to be particularly important in the first year, when no students had ever submitted the assessment and no staff had marked it – and as such, neither had a frame of reference.

In addition, having one designated member of staff allowed for effective tracking of student concerns. It was much easier for questions to be recorded, collated, and - where appropriate - disseminated to the entire cohort through a shared communication channel (I used an FAQ forum to allow for it to be easily updated). Tracking questions also allowed me to alter the assessment lectures for future years, adding answers to questions I hadn't anticipated in the first year.

Another key messaging choice came in deciding whether to present the task with confident assurance, as though it were straightforward and unproblematic, or whether to directly acknowledge the uncertainty that students might be feeling. Some educators might argue that it is preferable to present an assessment as straightforward and unproblematic, rather than directly acknowledging student uncertainty. This approach stems from the belief that projecting confidence helps to reassure students, reducing the risk that they perceive the task as overly daunting. If an educator frames an assessment as routine or simple, students may be more inclined to approach it with a sense of normalcy, rather than heightened anxiety. In this view, drawing explicit attention to nervousness could unintentionally amplify it, reinforcing the idea that the task is unusual or especially difficult. Additionally, presenting the assessment with confidence models professionalism and academic authority: it signals to students that the educator is in control, that the assessment is well designed, and that success is achievable if instructions are followed. For some students, this clear sense of structure and authority may be more reassuring than an open discussion of vulnerability. From this perspective, treating the assessment as straightforward can function as a stabilising force, giving students confidence by normalising the process. I came to believe, however, that explicitly addressing student anxiety was the more constructive option. I decided that to ignore or downplay those feelings risked isolating students, leaving them to conclude that their nervousness is a sign of personal inadequacy rather than a normal reaction to a new form of academic work.

By contrast, directly addressing uncertainty validates students' experiences and creates space for dialogue. When I said openly, "I know you may be nervous about this task," I found that students were visibly relieved. Acknowledging their emotions normalised the fact that assessments can be challenging and reassured them that they were not alone in their concerns. This approach also modelled a kind of academic honesty: learning and assessment are not always seamless processes, and it is appropriate to admit that navigating them may involve discomfort. In this way, addressing uncertainty helped to build trust between myself and the students, as they felt their concerns were being heard and taken seriously.

Direct acknowledgement also provided a platform for me to reframe uncertainty as an opportunity for growth. Rather than treating nervousness as a barrier, I encouraged students to see it as evidence that they were pushing themselves into new intellectual and creative territory. This reframing often helped them to view the assessment more positively, as a space for experimentation rather than a test of perfection. Additionally, once uncertainty was brought to the surface, it became easier to offer practical strategies for managing it: breaking down the

task into stages, using interactive classroom activities to rehearse key skills, and offering one-to-one support where needed.

Ultimately, directly addressing student uncertainty did not undermine the authority of the assessment; rather, it strengthened students' sense of security in tackling it. By naming the challenge, I was able to position myself as both a guide and a supporter, helping students to see that their anxieties were valid but surmountable. In doing so, I aimed to create an environment in which students could approach the assessment with honesty, resilience, and a readiness to embrace the creative possibilities it offered.

Staff Perspectives

Students are not the only people impacted by new or different assessments. As discussed above, there can be a vulnerability in the uncertainty for educators and practical resource considerations when supporting students' uncertainties. This section considers staff perspectives on the potential challenges of marking and the benefits to staff of creative assessments.

Navigating unfamiliar formats

One of the greatest challenges in introducing varied creative assessments lies in the difficulty of navigating formats that are unfamiliar to educators as assessors. While traditional essays or reports sit comfortably within established academic conventions, tasks such as TikTok videos, Instagram posts, podcasts, or performance scripts demand different literacies and evaluative frameworks. The issue is not that such forms are less rigorous, but rather that they are situated in domains where many assessors have less professional expertise. This unfamiliarity raises questions of fairness and consistency: how can work be marked reliably when conventions of quality and rigour are less well understood?

A strategy often recommended is to employ rubrics that foreground transferable learning outcome - such as clarity of communication, critical engagement with content, and demonstration of understandings of genre - rather than medium-specific skills. While such rubrics can help to establish a common ground, the challenge lies in striking the right balance: descriptors must be broad enough to encompass diverse outputs, yet precise enough to provide meaningful guidance for markers and students alike. The lack of exemplars in novel assessment formats further compounds the problem, as calibration across markers becomes more difficult in the absence of shared reference points. However, we had devoted time to

demonstrating to students how our marking rubric – usually applied to essays and exams – was still valid when applied to more creative assessments. Working with students to show our students this also served to remind us.

Our institution has several measures for quality assurance – moderation, calibration, and second marking – and in the first year of assessing, we decided to use two forms to encourage confidence in our academic judgement. As a team, we would usually moderate assessments as the final stage of marking. However, we decided to add calibration to the beginning of the process as well. This dialogue reduced inconsistencies, voiced and challenged assumptions and questions, and fostered greater confidence in evaluative, academic judgements. Communicating as we marked, checking in and getting opinions, also increased our confidence. Clarity of the aims of the assessment had made marking far easier, and after the marking was complete, we discussed the fact that the process had been far simpler than we had initially imagined it might have been. Several months later, reflection revealed a certain irony: the concerns expressed by staff had closely mirrored those of the students, yet the process ultimately unfolded as anticipated and as had been reassured throughout, proved to be entirely manageable!

Benefits

Although creative assessments can present challenges for staff, as a team we found a wide range of benefits that make the process deeply rewarding. One of the most notable advantages is the variety and freshness of student work. Unlike traditional essays, which can follow predictable structures and arguments, creative outputs often showcased students' individuality and inventiveness. This diversity prevents the marking process from becoming repetitive and instead provides staff with an invigorating experience, as each piece brings a distinct perspective and form of expression. As course convenor, I allocated assessments based not only on topics that dovetailed with the lecturer's research and academic interests but sought to partner students' work with markers who'd find their creative endeavours interesting or amusing. In this sense, creative assessments can reinvigorate staff engagement with the marking process by continually presenting something new. Going through and doing this allocation has been my favourite academic day of the past two years, as I get the opportunity to see all of the amazing things our learners have created.

Seeing the intended benefits for our students is also a source of personal and professional pride. Many of our students have flourished when given the freedom to express themselves in creative ways, and their enthusiasm is infectious. Witnessing students take ownership of

their projects, often producing work of a quality that exceeds expectations, is a source of professional fulfilment. For us, this affirmed the value of creative assessment as not only a means of evaluation but also as a pedagogical tool that fosters confidence, innovation, and deeper engagement with learning. That sense of pride is often deepened through one-to-one discussions, where we have had the opportunity to engage with students' ideas in a more personal and focused way. These conversations allow us to see the individuality behind each project and to understand the motivations, challenges, and aspirations driving the work. Such insights have fostered stronger connections between us and the students, making the marking process into more than an evaluative exercise. Instead, it becomes a continuation of a dialogue begun earlier in the learning journey. Watching students develop their projects from initial ideas to final submission is often a profoundly rewarding experience, similar to the supervision of a dissertation or thesis.

Final Thoughts

One of my favourite interactions about this assessment came from a student who asked if she could choreograph a tap dance for the assessment. 'Would I have to perform it for just you in your office or…?' We began to laugh and I reassured her she could record a video. She asked about the marking criteria and how I was qualified to assess her dancing - she was President of the Dance Society and I was a criminology lecturer… how would I know if it was good? This became the focus of her accompanying essay; a stunning exploration of crime and musical theatre, the potential challenges of interdisciplinary work, and the importance of disciplinary research and engaging with pre-existing scholarship rather than assuming knowledge. Her questions – and submission – beautifully exemplified both the difficulties of the assessment (practical questions of submission and grading) and the opportunities (creativity, bringing a different skillset into the degree, and academically interrogating a topic she would have been unlikely to consider on any other module).

A colleague questioned the 'point' of assessing her dance, claiming it was insufficiently academic and not suitable for university assessment. I challenged them to imagine their next REF-able submission requiring a creative piece alongside it: would they find it easy? No? Why not? We spoke about why I'd set the assessment and many of the ideas in this paper. They asserted I had probably also done it because I thought it would be fun – for our teaching team and the students. I did not hesitate in my confirmation. This sense of enjoyment should not be dismissed as trivial; rather, it is an important reminder that assessments can be both rigorous

and fun, and that learning often flourishes most when challenge and creativity are accompanied by a sense of delight.

References

McArthur, J. (2023) 'Rethinking authentic assessment: work, well-being and society', *Higher Education*, 85(1), pp. 85-101.

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[i] If you wish to learn more about the history of the term and how it can be reconceptualised beyond employability, I suggest reading McArthur's (2023).

[ii] Publications on this project are forthcoming. Please check their staff profiles on the Lancaster University School of Law webpages for updates.

A foot in the door, but requiring permission to stay: Reflections on positionality, ethics and values during postgraduate research collaboration with the police

Laura Briody[1]

Abstract:

Positioning the police as stakeholders in research promotes and permits their engagement with the research, from data gathering to application of the findings (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2016). In theory, collaborative research provides the opportunity for the co-production of knowledge between institutional actors and researchers (Janasoff, 2004). However, research in policing lags behind that in other public sectors, "characterised by mutual misunderstanding, suspicion, distrust and disengagement" (Crawford, 2020: 508). Competing priorities and values can significantly obstruct collaborative efforts between the police and researchers, instigating a 'dialogue of the deaf', hindering meaningful co-production (Bradley & Nixon, 2009). This paper on research experience gained during a PhD project that ran from 2018 to 2023 in collaboration with an English police force to reflect on the benefits, challenges and 'messiness' (Crawford, 2020) of collaboration and co-production of knowledge between policing and academia. Findings explore the role of positionality of the researcher to explore the nature of privilege within research, as well as the navigation of ethics and values when operating as an outsider invited into an institutional environment such as the police. Finally, the paper reflects on a future framework of collaborative working for researchers who wish to study the police and similar organisations.

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Introduction

Research in policing lags behind that in other public sectors, "characterised by mutual misunderstanding, suspicion, distrust and disengagement" (Crawford, 2020: 508). Criminology, as a discipline most frequently engaged in research on policing, is inherently bound up in ideas about values, which invariably becomes bound up in politics and 'sides' (Crawford, 2020), which can result in polarisation. The police, as an institution, are also affected by polarisation and this notion of 'sides', and so research on policing is often caught in the blowback - either pro or anti-police, rather than being pro-research, pro-evidence and pro-truth.

This paper draws on the reflections and experiences that I had researching the police during my PhD between 2018 and 2023, investigating their knowledge, identification and response to individuals considered 'vulnerable'. To begin, the role of the police liaison is discussed, investigating the importance and drawbacks of embedded relationships within the police force. Positionality is then examined in relation to my own 'vulnerability' - gender, race, disability and role as postgraduate researcher - to examine the role of privilege and paradox concerning access to the police in research. A continual theme throughout both sections is the role of the researcher as an invited outsider, summed up by this paper's title, which is a line I wrote in my methodology: the ever-present feeling that I had my foot in the door, but this welcome was temporary and conditional, requiring constant permission. Finally, the paper concludes by introducing an infant framework for developing mutually beneficial working relationships between researchers and the police, and for supporting said relationships. The framework is based on my own research and working experiences, including from literature when writing the thesis.

The foot in the door: the politics of the liaison

In 2018, I was awarded a CASE PhD studentship, funded by the ESRC, and began the project in September of that year. Non-participant observation of selected police units occurred between November 2019 and February 2020. Semi-structured interviews with police officers and staff took place between September 2020 and February 2021.

The project was a CASE studentship, which promoted direct collaboration with an institution for the purposes of research - in my case, a specific police force. There can be the position that for research to be independent, any involvement of non-academic actors counts as interference, promoting bias and risks distorting the data (Liebling et al., 2017). However, as

Liebling et al. (2017:996) reasoned, it is "difficult to imagine any form of empirical research without any form of interdependence."

The difficulty of collaborative projects such as the CASE studentships is the potential for those who liaise with researchers can quickly transform into gatekeepers, with permission only granted if particular views or ideology is promoted. I was wary of this possibility, and I am conscious that my experience was startling in its uniqueness. My liaison was a civilian staff member who had worked in the force for twenty years, with more recent roles concerning operational strategy for supporting 'vulnerable' people in the local community. They were an individual keenly invested in continually improving the force's practice and service to the local community. They presented as clear minded concerning the perennial problems within policing.

My liaison invited me to numerous police events, encouraging me to present my research to the police from the very beginning of the PhD and travelling together to said events allowed us to form a good relationship. We spent time getting to know each other as people, as well as practitioner and researcher, which I believed entrenched authenticity and insight into the foundations of the project (Liebling et al. (2017:998). We each had profound respect for the other's background, knowledge and ideas, whilst our overlapping values and passion for both policing and protecting those in the community provided a foundation of mutual trust (Crawford, 2020).

My police liaison had previous experience working with academics, though not for such a long period of time, and so had some familiarity with the academic approach to research. They strongly emphasised the desire that this longer-term project would provide insight and progress where short term projects had failed, left to sit on a shelf and forgotten - a common problem in organisational learning in the police (Crawford, 2020).

The most significant benefit to collaboration was access to the police. My police liaison organised my meetings and observations with police units - and gave departments a nudge when I was waiting for responses to interviews. Consistent exposure to the police gave me a thorough understanding of contemporary policing in practice, the challenges that they face and experience of 'vulnerability' in context, which I was able to carry forward into the data analysis and presenting feedback (Crawford, 2019).

We co-ordinated less once data gathering was complete, and I began writing and analysis. My liaison provided me with a significant amount of knowledge, drawn from their own experiences, but allowed me enough scope to draw on my own ideas - and, crucially, avoid a particular narrative developing from the research (Crawford, 2019; 2020). At no point was I asked what specific units had to say, what I observed or made suggestions about themes I could investigate. They were keen to see what I came up with myself and hear out my ideas. I needed, and was given, independence of both mind and thought (Liebling et al., 2017).

Permission to stay: politics of collaboration

I knew that feedback needed to be handled with care, lest my findings be discarded and hope for effective progress disappearing (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2016). The police are often under the scrutiny of the IOPC, the media, politicians and the public. I witnessed the paranoia that this can engender, and I was concerned of being doomed to the 'dialogue of the deaf', a fate of so many police researchers before me (Bradley & Nixon, 2009). Whilst I found myself welcomed by the vast majority of officers and staff, there were some who treated me with significant suspicion, including outright ignoring my presence and giving one word answers to questions.

Whilst mercifully rare, there were instances where I witnessed language and behaviour that I found unacceptable and uncomfortable. It was a challenge to my personal ethics - though such a framing implies something far loftier than my own beliefs about how to treat people with respect. This is part of the 'messiness' of co- productive research alluded to by Crawford (2020). My discomfort was worsened when those around them appeared to tolerate this behaviour - though I also concede that the behaviour may have been addressed behind closed doors, specifically not in my presence. I was able to speak to my police liaison about one specific incident that I was disturbed to witness, as well as a police trainer who was present. But I was also conscious that I did not have carte blanche to report every indiscretion. Nor, as a researcher within the policing environment, did I have the status or power to speak up at the time - my role required mute, objective observation. Further, I needed the trust of individual officers and staff to be present so that the research could be conducted, which could be lost if I came across as abrasive or meddling. Overly critical or even abolitionist research agendas can cause alienation and limited access (Liebling et al., 2017).

The drawbacks of having a solid foundation based on relationships became apparent when I entered the later writing stages of the PhD. My liaison, and many of those senior management

figures, left the force but continue to work in roles dedicated to improving policing through research. Whilst I had the support of the Acting Assistant Chief Constable, they were replaced and I was faced with new faces in new roles. These individuals did not appear to understand the purpose of the project, my findings or my role: they had their own agenda for progressing the force that did not include a PhD student brought in by their predecessors. The relationship soured considerably when I was asked if I could hand over my data to them for review, which I had to decline . After this, I was no longer invited to Vulnerability Strategy meetings, where I previously had been a frequent guest, and my e-mails went unanswered. This was a disappointing turn of events concerning the force, but gave me a swift, if brutal, education on perhaps a more 'normal' experience of researching in policing. However, I may have been just a PhD student, but I had the right to say no and walk away. This option is a more difficult avenue to take - if indeed one is available - for researchers whose funding or employment is more firmly embedded as a result of police co-operation. Research can be directed, narratives shaped and findings buried below the party line. In my case, a straight reading might be that my findings will be put on the metaphorical shelf and forgotten - just as my liaison and I hoped to avoid. However, being a PhD student and now full-time academic, I have the power and position to publish my findings and speak about my experiences.

Positionality, 'vulnerability' and privilege

I now wish to turn to the topic of positionality, reflecting on the notion of 'vulnerability' within research, power and paradox. 'Vulnerability' is defined here on its most basic form, the susceptibility to harm (Cousens, 2017), as well as the term's implication of weakness (Brown, 2011; 2017) and role in examining power dynamics (Fineman, 2008).

At the beginning of the project, I of course already had ideas about who the police were and what I thought they did. These ideas were often in conflict with one another: the naive mythos I held as a child and teenager on a diet of too many police procedurals that asserted the police were a force for good; the child growing up Catholic in Glasgow in the 1990s with family in Northern Ireland, warned that the police were not there to protect us; the cynical, liberal adult academic who had read too many cases of miscarriages of justice, and committed to the agendas of feminism and anti-racism.

Coming into the project, I attempted to place myself in a position of willing ignorance and of humility. Rather than trying to form opinions, I listened to a wide range of individuals and read from a wide range of sources on 'vulnerability' and policing. I managed to avoid cynicism, as

well as making assumptions, which in retrospect allowed my ideas to "be worked out afresh" (Liebling et al., 2017).

In policing environments, I often felt anxious, out of place and uncertain. I was a young woman in a male-dominated space, conscious of institutionalised sexism and police misogyny - please recall that this project began in 2018, before more recent high profile inspections on the topic. Women face more challenges when working in male dominated environment (Martin & Barnard, 2013): female police officers in particular face "persistent barriers" in their role in terms of their employment and promotion (Chan et al., 2010:425), with a perceived "cult of masculinity" within the force both historically and culturally (Reiner, 2010: 128; 172; Silvestri, 2017; HMICFRS, 2022). In my ethics application, my gender was identified as a risk factor for my safety in the field..

Researching the topic of 'vulnerability' therefore necessitated introspection on my own 'vulnerability' and its relevance to the position that I was in. I had - have - other characteristics that would also render me 'vulnerable': disabilities, including neurodiversity (Gilson, 2013). These conditions remained, however, invisible to participants, as I saw no reason to make them visible.

It was the topic of invisible disabilities and gender that prompted me to consider the shifting dynamics of power, privilege and 'vulnerability' within my field positionality. The invisibility of my own 'vulnerabilities', alongside my role as a researcher interested in policing, meant that many officers and staff assumed that I was 'not vulnerable'. In an interview with a call handler specifically assigned the 'not vulnerable' label to both themselves and me, despite knowing very little about me. I was, for the most part, seen as being aligned with the police. I was located on their 'side' physically in their operational unit, hearing their 'side' of the story, rather than on the other 'side' of, the phone, the custody desk - the side where service users were located. I was assumed to be like them - and with that assumption came access.

I am also conscious that being a young woman occasionally was an advantage, rather than an obstacle. I have a young-looking face, and an appearance that was non-threatening: I would describe my appearance as that of someone people always feel comfortable asking for directions. My position as a PhD student also carried paradoxical privilege. The early stages of a research career can provide difficult experiences concerning power, status and environment (Liebling et al., 2017). I can only speculate, but I suspect that many officers and staff let their guard down around me to an extent as I did not appear as an authority figure. I

was not there to inspect or critique them - I had little power or status, and nothing about my demeanour gave them any reason to feel threatened with my gender playing a big role here. I suspect race played a role here too: that my reception and potentially even the ability to build rapport and gather data would have been impacted if I was from an ethnic minority. The force itself and the community that they served were a white majority, with an extremely small percentage of individuals from ethnic minorities. All of the participants I interviewed were white, whilst only one member of staff that I met in observation was not white. Research often focuses on the impact of institutionalised racism on civilians and service users, whilst the racialisation of researchers themselves is overlooked. It is therefore particularly key for us to ask questions around privilege - race, gender, disability and class - when sending researchers into institutions that are haunted by systemic bigotry.

A proposed framework for collaboration

I hope to have provided some insight into the evidence on which I have drawn for a proposed framework to support policing research, and as well as underscore why I feel one is needed so strongly. The messiness of research, the collision of personal ethics and reality, and positionality, were absent topics from my university courses. Rather, research was a pure, objective and clean endeavour. Whilst experiential knowledge can be vital to the research process and learning more widely, concerning these topics I frequently felt as if I was stumbling around in the dark, very alone and very inadequate.

This is a framework very much in its infancy: still very much in theory, with a need for the input and insight of the wider research community. I am still learning my craft.

Any framework would necessitate spelling out the benefits and the challenges of co-production in policing research. That clear access is desireable, whilst gatekeeping is to be avoided. Future research relationships must be clear minded and direct in understanding and addressing the mechanics of previous failures and barriers.

Relationships play a key role (Liebling et al., 2017; Menichelli, 2019). Training on working with the police, and vice-versa, is suggested. Multi-agency training has shown to enhance practitioners knowledge and understanding of one another's roles, as well as establishing a foundation for working relationships (Atkinson et al., 2007). A similar tactic could be employed, with training co-produced and co-led by researchers and liaisons.

Humility, respect, willingness, reciprocity, transparency and communication are some key attributes I have identified - as have other researchers, of which I made note whilst researching multi-agency working and the police (Noga et al., 206; Liebling et al., 2017; Cummins et al. 2018; Ball et al., 2024; Power et al., 2024). Shared values more broadly, as well as shared understanding in terms of the research project, the individual roles and responsibilities - again, mirroring the benefits of multi-agency working (Ball et al., 2024).

I have enough experience to know, however, that relationships take time to build, with the collaborative generation of knowledge often a slow and cumulative process as a result - and this is at odds with research that is frequently market driven or limited by time and/or funding (Liebling et al., 2017).

Suggestions include working with a liaison on a research grant or proposal, so the liaison is not only embedded but invested from a very early stage - the liaison in my project provided input and advice to the original ESRC application. Expanding on the use of networks, as my supervisor did, is also a potential key avenue for identifying actors within policing institutions that are, for the lack of a better term, pro-research.

I would also encourage consistent critical reflection by researchers and liaisons alike on their own roles, their knowledge and how they know said knowledge. Such consideration must also include reflections, as I have done here, about positionality, the possibility of bias (towards others and towards ourselves), assumptions we have about roles and institutions, as well as the intersecting characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity, class and education, mental health and disability, and indeed beyond.

The framework I propose is not a silver bullet, nor is it close to completion. I wanted to take this opportunity to highlight my own experience in the hopes it might benefit others in the future, as well as to honestly understand my own experience and the insight it has provided. Policing can be a frustrating, baffling, tiring and messy arena – to work in and to research. But it is work that is endlessly necessary to advance the causes of social and criminal justice. How to improve and advance the relationship between policing and academic research is therefore vital. We need greater understanding, insight and action to ensure that we not only get our foot in the door – but find solid groundwork when we do.

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